

Word from the NORTH



A Tribe & Cycle



Dream Pod 9





Children of Prophecy



Seventh Interlude

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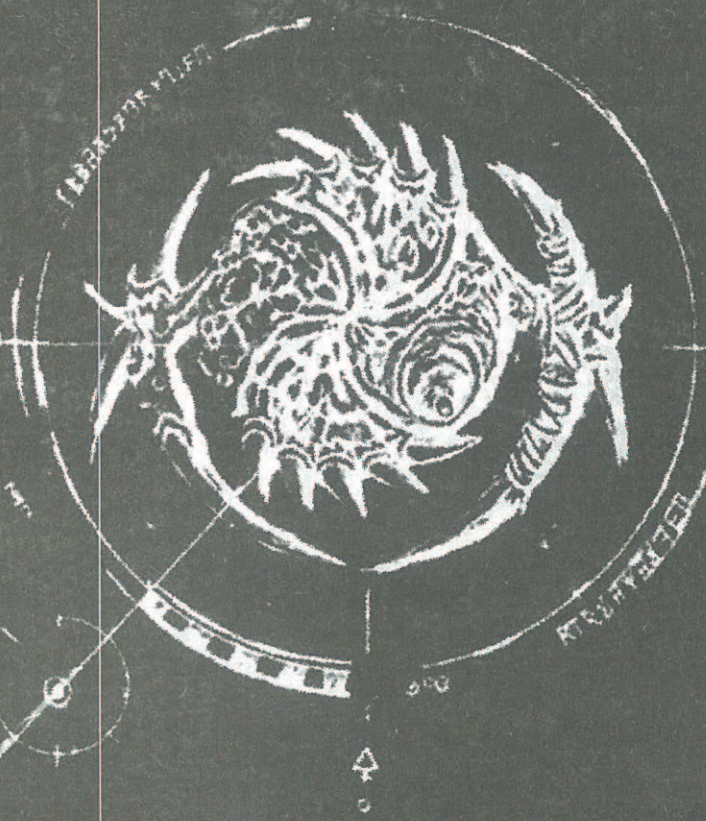
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Chapter one: The Masker's Tale

I hear you,
Trapped souls
Beckoning for release.
The others, they do not listen
They do not see.
But the time has come for them to open their eyes.
They are ready now.
Fear not,
For the spirits plead to be set free.
- Halos, Guide of the Eighth Tribe



Lovers Unveiled

From the Legends of Veronique, Poet

With the brush in my hand, I painted the final, perfect crimson line that completed my most cherished work. It was sheer perfection, a wonder to behold. I laid the brush down gently on the cloth beside me, like a lover after an evening of pleasure. The tools of my craft adorned the floor, fine brushes, carving utensils, paints and dyes. They were the objects of my sweet affection, always attending to me whenever I had the urge or desire.

I gently rose from my meditative position, the disciplined posture I always took during the practice of my art. It focused my emotions and allowed me to tap into the River of Dream, channeling the energies of my surroundings into manifestations of beauty. The ultimate expression of such beauty was delicately held in my hands, the mask of Chantalle that had taken me four difficult years to complete. I gazed at the representation of her visage, the curves and lines of the sculpture drawing me into memories of passion and lust. She was my true love and I missed her, the void of her absence eating away at me with each passing day. The mask was my connection to her, although, with all of its similarities, it could not hope to touch the purity that she held.

I walked to the corner of the room, where, upon a table, rested a thick, shapeless glove that I placed on my hand. With it, I then opened the door to the kiln. The heat wafted outwards from the small furnace, stifling the air with a blasting wave. Even the raging fire within the sealed stone hearth cowered at the flames that still burned deep within my heart for her; a flame that would continue to burn until the mask was finally cast. I reached into the depths of the fire, placing the mask on raised supports that burned white-hot. The thought that all of my labor, all of my emotion, was spent on this one piece, with only the intention of its ritual destruction, caused me to hesitate. Perhaps, if I did not complete it, the inevitable would not be so. I could hold on to the memory of my lover for a while longer.

It went against my Tribal promise to hold a mortal in greater importance than my Fatima, and so it was that my Guildmaster ordered me four years ago to sunder my love for Chantalle. He could only keep the knowledge away from the other Maskers for so long, delaying them from chastising me with the greatest of punishments. The mask needed to be cast; made solid, hard and cold, then shattered in a ritual that threatened to take away something that I promised I would always keep. Not even losing my soul rivaled my fear because, at least then, as an exile, I could still love Chantalle without regret, without guilt.

I let out a breath, cleansing myself of the heretical thoughts, and closed the kiln, the mask trapped inside to undergo the torture of the flames.

In reflection, she came to me that same night to save me, although I had to endure the depths of sorrow to understand why. It was in fevered sleep, alone and sweating in the sheets, a cool wind blowing over my naked form, that I heard her whisper to me. I believed it to be, at first, yet another haunting dream, the kind I often received when the night wished to tease me with its dark, malicious heart. That fall eve, however, it was not the game of an ill wind. My lover did indeed return to me.

I parted the soft curtains to my chamber, passing into a sweet-scented hall accented with pillows and romantic alcoves. Her voice beckoned me, my form passing the richly painted walls, my fingers trailing through the darkness. I felt her nearby, then saw the silhouette of a shapely form against a window near a column lined with colorful ribbons. The moonlight cast against her. My hand reached out.

"Veronique," she said, "please, don't touch me."

"Chantalle. . ." My words caught in my throat.

"My love. I have missed you, but do not come closer, for there is a part of me that suffers from a taint that consumes. I would not bear to see you succumb to my touch."

I. The Masker's Tale



Veronique, Magdalite
Masker

Veronique is a Masker who would have had great promise in her guild had she not fallen in love so deeply with Chantalle. The Masker Guildmaster acted as a mentor to her, but saw the danger that lay in her future should she not overcome the passion she held for Chantalle. She was told to create a mask in the image of Chantalle, the best she could craft, and then destroy it; something that she agreed to do, but has taken far too long to accomplish. Her standing as a Magdalite has become even more precarious since she has started cavorting with the Fallen under the guise of a Poet. When she tells her stories, she dons the mask of Chantalle in homage to her lover.

Highlights: Passionate, Artistic,
Resolute

Attributes: APP +1, CRE +2,
WIL +1

Skills: Craft (Mask) 3/+1, Dance 1/
0, Disguise (face) 1/+2, Dreaming
1/+0, Etiquette (Maskers Guild) 2/
0, Grooming 1/+1, Lore (Capal) 1/
0, Lore (Storytelling) 2/0,
Seduction 1/+1, Synthesis 1

"All these years — lost," I said. I held perfectly still for fear of collapsing. "Where? Why?"

"I will answer you, my love, although the words that I shall impart to you this night hold no light, only a darkness that threatens us all. I wish that I could speak to you of beautiful things, but I no longer carry the vibrant spirit that you once knew and loved. Only sadness remains."

She slid down the column, her withered, knotted, arms wrapped around it, her legs awkwardly folded beneath her. The moonlight revealed ruptures in her skin, that once perfect alabaster. I turned my gaze to her eyes; the light from within them blinding me to the lesions that ran across her flesh, once so clear and white, now mottled and bruised. I knelt before her, a whispered breath away from her touch.

The image of the mask that I created for her, burning in the kiln, imposed itself upon her desolate face while I listened to her tale. A tale that instilled in me a sensation that I had never before experienced — a sensation that I shall share with you, gathered before me, as I retell the words of my lover. They are words that speak of evil and the lies of those who claim to be saviors. You, as the Eighth Tribe, have proven yourselves to be the Children of Prophecy. Come learn of the challenges that will stand in the way of your people's conquest and the liberation of humanity. I will tell you the story, as near to the truth of her words as I can come. This tale is not for the faint of heart but, then again, neither is our destiny. Come. Listen to the word from the north.



Treachery Has No Love — Tale of the Dreamer

From the Legends of Chantalle, Diplomat of Magdalen

There is a belief that the love one possesses for her Fatima is the purest and most divine form of expression a dreamer can ever have. My faith in that belief was called into question years ago, my life never to be the same. They are known as the **Masters**, the highest rank of all the guilds of Magdalen. They were never seen publicly, always shadowed in rumors, never spoken of directly. When Hannah, a Siren who dealt often with the guild of Ecstatics, came to me, I was overjoyed with the promise of her words. The Masters wanted to have a private audience with me, deep within the towers of Xstasis.

To be given such an honor required ritual preparation, but Hannah stayed my enthusiasm, informing me that my immediate attention was called for with no time, or opportunity, to speak with any others that I knew, including yourself, my love. She guided me to the secret halls within our Fatima's tower, to places which I was denied access before. Only the Elders and Priesthood were allowed into the heart of Xstasis; something that did not pass from my attention as Hannah escorted me deeper within.

The ceiling soared high above my head, pillars and arches supporting its splendor with beautiful displays of embossed marble of brilliant colors. The ground glittered with the Dream, my footsteps leaving shining stars in their wake, casting a warm glow upon the walls. There was a perfume in the air, seductive, caressing my senses with each step forward. If you could only have felt the warmth in my soul, the desire within my heart, a feeling that is so foreign to me now, yet the memories of it still remain like a sore that cannot heal.

Hannah took my hand and led me through a threshold that opened into a magnificent chamber. There were fireflies flitting through the air, dancing to music only they could hear and giving the room a whimsical brilliance. The edges of the chamber disappeared into an enchanting mist that glowed with colors that could only be imagined and brought forth from the River of Dream. Hannah showed me to the center of the floor, before retreating along the luminescent trail of our swiftly disappearing footsteps. I stood there, vulnerable, yet I did not fear.

Perhaps I should have.

I heard their mellifluous voices, seven of them, mingled together in harmony, each one complementing the other without stealing any of its purity. They were the most serene voices I had ever heard, and I longed to embrace the wisdom that was woven into them. The Masters then sang to me, telling me of why I had been summoned to them. Their voices were soft, floating on the wind in a chorus, echoing gently through the air. I listened intently, my mind free of any conflicting thoughts so that I could fully accept all that they said. I closed my eyes and listened to the Masters of Magdalen. A single clear voice rose above the resonant harmony to instruct me before fading, allowing successive voices to take its place.

"Chantalle, Ecstatic and lover of the Divine Magdalen, Heart of the People. You have been called forth to carry out a quest for your Fatima."

"You have been chosen. You, as an Ecstatic, are no longer capable of serving Her as you once did. You are stripped of your responsibility as a member of the guild."

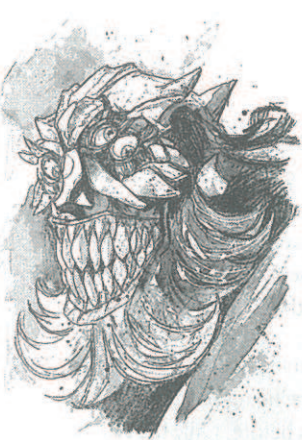
"There is a task at hand that requires one with a strong spirit. The visions have told us that you are the one we must send."

"A conflict surfaces that threatens the souls of the people. The pact weakens over our heads. Direct action must be taken."

"You have a powerful destiny ahead of you, Chantalle, Diplomat of the Withered Rose."

"You will leave immediately. Your release from Xstasis is the last time you will ever set foot on the island of Vimary, a noble sacrifice for your Fatima."

"An emissary from the H'I Kar will take you from the Circle of the Chosen on tomorrow's eve. The Lover is always within your heart, Chantalle."



Sth'tcak, Koleris Iv'chet of Capal

A minion to the Koleris Prince of Capal, Sth'tcak has only a sliver of knowledge pertaining to his role in the future of Capal. He knows that there are major changes taking place in both the Baron's realm in the south and in Capal as well, but he cares little for the intrigue. He has made secret bargains with Eth'ian, who has promised him that, when the time is right, all the power he wishes for will be his. Naïve in the intricate dealings of the Z'bri, Sth'tcak only wants to have as many Serfs as necessary to ensure him a position of greater authority and the title of Captain. This attitude may see him in over his head, since he presently has no idea that Eth'ian of Melanis has a personal connection to one of his chosen Serfs, Isa.

Highlights: Savage, Power hungry,
Deadly

Attributes: AGI +4, BLD +3, FIT
+3, KNO -1, WIL +2, STA 55, UD
12, AD 10

Sundering: Shattering, Exsan-
guination Aspect: Holding

Skills: Athletics 2/+4, Camouflage
1/0, Dodge (Projectiles) 2/+4,
Hand-to-Hand (Infighting) 3/+4,
Intimidate 2/+3, Navigation
(Capal) 2/-1, Survival (Capal
Wargrounds) 1/0

Weapons: Claws UD+10, Bite UD +
12, Armored Skin (AR 15)

Unending Pleasures Pain

I stood in complete horror, my body cold, chilled, while the realization of their words sunk in. I wanted to scream. Why had they chosen me? What had I done to deserve a task that struck me as being the worst punishment I could endure? A Diplomat to the H'l Kar, never to be seen again by another Dreamer's eyes, only to bear whatever twisted, vile treatment the Z'bri could inflict upon me. What secrets was I to uncover as a Diplomat? What had Magdalen seen for me? How was I to face the future without fear?

The chamber of the Masters lost its magic for me in the silence that followed. I was alone and afraid. I did not notice the hands grab at me and bind me in tight leather, my face and body completely covered except for my mouth and genitals. I was packaged as a gift. The Sangis was to come for me to enjoy my flesh before returning to his own perverse masters and delivering me to the Baron. I let the drug take hold of my mind. Better to have faith in my Fatima than face the reality of my future. Or so I thought.

The cold night air stroked the exposed areas of my skin, and my body trembled at its touch. I struggled against the bonds that kept me tethered to the pole, my last hope of escape fading with the day's light. The Circle of the Chosen was a place I previously had no cause to see, yet that was where I found myself. I was glad that the mask I wore prevented me from setting eyes on the cursed circle, although the denial of my sight was also poison to my mind, heightening my other senses.

I felt the beast come for me. He untied me from the pole and carried me for quite some time. He later set me down on a hard, uneven surface, and then took pleasure from me, the taint from his lecherous form forcing me to enjoy the expressions of what he called sensuality. My body was his plaything, his sexual organs raping my every orifice. I felt the urge to return to him the pain that I felt from his violating assault, but he was in ecstasy from the wounds that I tore upon him. My nails ripped at his eyes and my teeth bit into his engorged flesh. He writhed in satisfaction, allowing me to intensify his experience with my panicked defense. My energy soon dissipated; the beast's appetite was seemingly incapable of being sated. Even during fleeting moments of consciousness I could still feel him, my mind searching into the River of Dream for some hope of release.

Then, I tasted blood. There was a vast amount of it pouring over my body, coating me in its slick embrace. I spat and choked on it, my hands flailing to tear the mask from my face so that I could breathe. I dug my nails into the rips that were created in the mask from the beast's excesses, freeing my eyes for the first time since being bound. I was lying on a rock precipice, its jagged edge inches away, dropping hundreds of feet to a river below. Before me lay the Sangis, his body twisted and bleeding from a rent in his chest, ribs and bones jutting into the air. His bloodied hand was on my throat, locked in a death grip. I pried myself from it, gagging on the fluids that remained in my mouth. I crawled away from him - the creature that destroyed my purity - only to find myself in front of a savior that made my preceding tormentor look benign.

"The Sangis has overstepped his role in all of this," said the Koleris with slow sibilance, pointing to the exsanguinated corpse. "No matter. Count Lothar has done well with his end of the bargain, like the Melanis said. So, you are the one they fear. Hmmp. Well, Sth'tcak is going to take you where you cannot inform your Fatimas of our secrets. Say goodbye to your dreams, diplomat, for they will not serve you well in Capal."

Descent

I don't know how many weeks passed, as I slipped in and out of consciousness, still suffering from the damage caused by the Sangis. The Koleris, Sth'tcak, did not harm me in any way during our journey, although I could see in his eyes the anguish that it caused him to refrain from tearing me to pieces. He took me along a river that smelled like a thousand rotting corpses, the churning, stagnant water flowing over shadowed forms within its depths. In the distance I could see high walls and dark buttresses rising into the air, a thick, foul smoke choking the atmosphere. My head lolled from side to side, a cleaving pain gnawing incessantly in my head.

I awoke, lying in a damp room that smelled of mold. The air was thick with spores, entering my lungs with every breath and forcing me to cough uncontrollably in an attempt to cleanse their poisons from my system. I kissed the moisture that clung to the walls, my throat opening up again, safe from the dehydration that had constricted it moments before. The cell I was in was small, and no light penetrated its walls. I groped in the darkness for some sustenance and found a cold slab of meat, uncooked yet free of blood. Its smell repelled me, its surface squirming with tiny harbingers of pestilence. Whatever fluids I had regained exited my body, my vomit mingling with the still water that I needed to drink to live. I sat there, shivering, naked and sore, staring into the blackness, without any tears to comfort me.

The flies started buzzing a few days later; the meat that was meant to give me life providing a breeding ground for filthy insects instead. My body was emaciated, wracked with ceaseless coughing fits, trapped in the cell of death. It hated me, this room. It was giving me all I needed to sustain myself, but, at the same time, only prolonged the inevitable. I crawled over to the rotting meat, feeling my way through my own vomit and excrement, and picked it up, cold and limp in my hands. I licked it clean of the maggots that squirmed upon it, before attempting to tear a piece from the putrid flesh. It was tough and covered in slime that made it difficult to grasp. Finally, I opened my dry, cracked mouth and placed it within, biting, gnawing.

I ate the corpse with a ravenous delight.

It was too late for me then. I knew I had given in to the Z'bri. I was no longer the Lover I had been all my life. I was an animal, driven only to survive.



Captive Souls

Every week, a new piece of rancid meat was delivered to me while I slept. When I awoke, I ate without question, the week's hunger gnawing away at me more persistently than I could resist. The effects of the raw flesh were causing me to lose my grasp on my senses. I hallucinated frequently — horrible nightmares that mingled with my waking moments — until I could no longer tell the difference between what was real and what was imagined. I had conversations with the faces in the darkness, spirits that visited me either out of sorrow for my plight or envy for the sensations of reality. I even came to enjoy the perfume stench of my own rotting body. When the horrors of waking became too much, I would throw myself in fits against the wall, hoping that unconsciousness would overtake me, but the nightmares were often worse. In my dark cell, I could not see the things that haunted me, but in my sleep I could see them for all their evil.

I carried on this way for countless days and nights, although those terms held no importance for me. I could not tell whether the sun shone outside or not, and, after a while, I could not even imagine its light. The seasons must have passed, the cycles progressing as they always did for the free, while I was forced to endure my purgatory. Only the darkness kept me company until one day, when I awoke to the sound of singing.

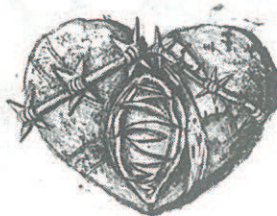
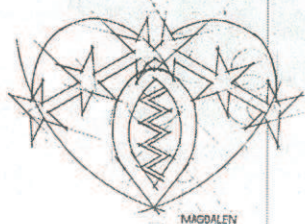
She had a rough voice, weathered is how I would describe it, like a person who has never had a chance to rest from the toil of a day's work. I yearned for her voice though, and thought it to be a gift of my imagination, fleeting and ready to disappear now that I had found it, but it did not. It stayed, continuing its somber hymn, my hands reaching from whence it came, startling its carrier with my presence. She scrambled away from me, screaming in fear. I did not understand her yells, her language different than the Tribal speak I was once accustomed to. I calmed her by retreating to the far side of the cell, showing that I meant no harm. We stayed like that for a long time, neither one of us speaking a word or venturing to the center of the cell where the meat lay. Thoughts of warm flesh, filled with blood still pumping, swam through my mind, but I defied the desire that rushed to overwhelm me. Oh, how her warm skin would have felt between my teeth, fresh and alive. I, instead, took my rotten offering and placed it in front of her before slipping away to my dank corner; a putrid gift for the forlorn.

She began to sing again but, this time, I felt a surge of energy that I hadn't felt in recent memory.

Whoever it was that I was trapped with could Dream!

Her voice took away the fear from my soul, and I felt a connection to her from a part of me that I had thought was long dead. Over time, we learned to communicate with each other, her dreams teaching me the crude language of the Serfs. She told me many stories of what it was like to be a Serf in Capal, the lifetimes of torture they endured under the influence of the Z'bri Lords. I could finally comprehend the wretchedness of life without freedom, without hope. Except she, the serf named Isa, whom I came to love, was different than the creatures she spoke of in her tales. She may not have had freedom, but she did have hope. Hope that she instilled in me over the time we spent together in that lonely cell beneath the City of Hate.

You can see that I am here now, free from the brutal confines of my captivity, but not free of the damage it has done to my soul. Many people sacrificed themselves to see me here, and my tale would not be complete without informing you of their own quests and the challenges that they overcame. Their reasons were mixed and varied, but in the end, Fate played a larger role than they first realized. You will come to see this as well, while I continue my story. Pity them for what they endured, but also honor them for the purity of vision they represent. I would not have returned to you otherwise.



Spirit of the Stars — Tale of the Fallen

From the journals of Damien Farshadow, Jacker of the Eighth Tribe

We had survived the winter after the destruction of Hom. The rebuilding was slow but certain, the trial of the preceding year giving us new direction and promise for a brighter future. There were hard times ahead of us, but those that remained were strong and brave. We were no longer the dregs of the Tribal society that clung to the Seven Deaths but, rather, our own people, with our own heroes to rally behind. "Destiny is humanity's quest and humanity's quest alone," was a popular saying around Hom these days. Well, at least I liked to say it. The Eighth Tribe knew that it was our duty as a people to strive for a new beginning and, with Joshua's Prophecy to guide us, the liberation of all those who still suffered under the oppressive weight of the Z'bri would be assured.

My cell was called *L'Esprit des Etoiles*, and we followed a Doomsayer named Kareenna. She was a visionary who followed Veruka the Martyr's teachings with passion and determination, intent on unfolding all the mysteries that dogged our progress to freedom. She guided us with a sure hand, and we believed in her visions without a doubt in our minds as to the truth of her words.

I still remember the day Kareenna woke up beside me, with that look she always got when she had a powerful dream.

"Damien, they're out there," she said. Her words were fast, her face flushed with excitement. "I knew there were more, I knew it! Come, we have to tell the others. I have to tell you what I have seen, the secrets that the Fatimas do not wish for us to learn."

We gathered under the trees at the center of our cell's encampment, not far from the Temple where the Guides did their work. I stood close to Kareenna, her energy bathing me like waves against the shore. I had the look of eager anticipation upon my face, the visions of Kareenna ready for all of us to hear.

"My friends, we have received a vision from the Goddess, the richest I have ever experienced. Our Tribe, the Eighth, has been chosen, and we shall readily accept the momentous task before us, for we are all united under one cause." She stood in the center of our circle, the firelight reflecting off of her face and form. She looked beautiful, pristine. "We know that the Fatimas fail us, the people, in destroying the Beasts that continue to oppress so many countless souls. Humanity is not free. Look around, at all of the hopeless Tribals, clinging to the Fatimas for forgiveness, when none is coming. Look at the fires that burn to the north of the Seven Fingers where the serfs, enslaved within their hamlets, labor for their Z'bri masters. Look at all of the Squats, fighting for what cannot be theirs, because we do not have it to give. Is this freedom? Is this what the Fatimas came here to accomplish?"

"These are all things we have seen first hand, experienced as members of the Tribes and fought against as members of the Eighth. We are the bearers of Destiny, as it is scripted in the Prophecy of Joshua; we all know this, yet there is an evil even greater than the one we see across the river. There is a place, far from here, beyond the Northern Wind, where thousands of hapless souls are enslaved to the Beasts that continue to reign supreme. What can we do to stop this? Surely taking the fight to the Z'bri would see us all perish, wasting away the precious footholds we have gained in an act of foolishness and naïveté.

"What is our future, then? Are we all that is meant to be? Is this it?"

"I say no! I have heard them, my sisters. They call to us. There is hope to the north, past the H'l Kar and into the unexplored Outlands. That is where we will go, and liberate the Dreamers that have never known the Fatimas — only the Goddess. They are the ones that send us the visions — of a city that will free us, if only we will free them. Let us save the children of the Goddess, my friends. Let us be the true liberators of humanity."

We all raised our swords to the stars and yelled out, "*L'Esprit des Etoiles*, forever!"

I just loved it when Kareenna had a vision.

Let the Heavens Burn

We found ourselves within the walls of a city that stank of death. We all felt the taint around us, but it wasn't the need to overcome it that drove us to go further, rather, it was the beckoning we received from deep within. Tight avenues lined with skinned bodies greeted us, rank fluids boiling from cracks in their charred flesh. It was sickening, the heavy weight of despair that clung to everything. I looked to Karennia and then to the others of my cell. If it wasn't for the conviction we had in our quest, then I am certain we would have all fled for the sake of our sanity.

The River, that led us further than the Tribes ever had dared to explore, guided us and kept us on track. Once we had reached the outer settlements, where we saw endless plowed fields of cartilage and crushed bone, we knew we were getting closer to our goal, although some of us voiced an opinion to turn back.

"Karennia, this city before us. It is a place of pure evil. I can feel it seeping into my pores, choking the air I breathe with each step forward. Do you honestly believe that there are dreamers there?" asked Fredrique. He looked back at me for assurance, but I did not agree with his stance. I wanted to go on.

"It is difficult to understand, Fredrique, but have faith in the dream. There is promise in the suffering. It is what gave our ancestors hope, and it surfaces once again. Only this time, we are the messengers of the Goddess, and it is our destiny."

I patted Fredrique on the back, the small gesture giving him the strength to take the next step forward.

"I'm sorry, Damien," he said, looking at me intently. "I don't know why, it's just so hard for me to think clearly. I feel like there are voices in my head, screaming eternally. I can't concentrate."

I stopped him from continuing his destructive argument. "You are a warrior of the Eighth Tribe. The Goddess needs us to spread Her word to the darkest recesses of the world. This is our calling, Fredrique. This is what we are meant to do. Trust in Karennia's visions. Trust in me. The voices cannot steal your faith."

The Seventh Circle

"He speaks the truth, as does Karennia. We all know this. I must admit, though, that even I hear the voices in my head, like a thousand screams pleading for release." Tatiana was a Herite, hailing from the honored exiles of Dahlia. Soft-spoken and kind, she felt that the masses still enslaved by the Z'bri were the key to unveiling the secrets of the Fatimas. Her quest to discover the power that gave our ancestors the ability to call the Goddess had brought her to our cell.

"Why do they haunt us? We are here to save them — can they not understand that?" Fredrique argued. He was not as strong, spiritually, as the rest of us but, as a fighter, he was the best. I knew that he needed our support, just as we would need his if we came to more physical challenges.

"We have the liberties of intellect and living consciousness, Fredrique," said Karennia. "Spirits are creatures of emotion and all they feel is pain; they envy you for the life that you wield." Karennia pointed across the distance, getting us back to the task at hand. "Stay strong, my friends, for we must slip into the city by passing under that tower. We cannot afford conflict, within or without, before discovering the location of the dreamers. Come, the day does not wait."

From our vantage, we could see that the city was encompassed by an imposing set of walls, consisting of many disparate elements that acted as one, stretching several hundred feet upwards. It encircled a myriad of infernal structures; dark towers that sucked all light away from the sky and expelled it as black, noxious fumes that streamed upwards, creating an eternal night. The outlying structures that fell away from the walls were smaller than the centermost, pressed tighter together and forming tiny alleys. The streets moved with shadowy forms, fleeting from one doorway to the next. We never saw their faces, but we heard them cursing us as we passed by their crumpled, hunched bodies which were but a few steps away. I don't know why they did not hinder us, although I am glad for it. Tatiana supposed it was because they were not ordered to attack us, that only creatures of free will could take such actions. I didn't care to speculate.

Flesh and Flame

We could soon see that the city rose up towards the center, a massive citadel, taller than the structures around it, standing like a sentient entity watching over the river below. Its base was surrounded by smaller forts, each one more imposing than any of Joan's Towers. The top of the fortress was capped with green gables, a sickly glow emanating from it revealing winged beasts circling on currents of air.

"In the Goddess' name, what is that?" said Fredrique. "Whatever resides in that abysmal tower can only be the cruelest creature on the face of all the land."

"Do you feel it?" asked Karennia. "There is a power within, but it is not evil. I... I did not feel it before." She looked confused, something that did not often happen.

"We must stay focused. Is it the dreamers, Karennia? Are they within the Citadel?"

"No, Tatiana. It is something else. Perhaps, a key to something larger, more profound than we could have ever imagined."

"Can you still feel the dreamer's call, Karennia?" I grabbed her arm, bringing her back to her senses. "We need to find the dreamers."

Karennia took in a deep breath, allowing her spirit to feel for the ethereal realm. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head, a chant escaping from her lips. I watched her tap into the River of Dream and, even with the difficulties of our surroundings challenging her abilities, she seemed confident in her powers. It was during my fixation upon her serene beauty that I noticed the quickly growing shadow fall across her face.

I dove at her, knocking her body to the side with a violent shove as a clawed monstrosity landed where she was kneeling, its hulking form cracking the concrete beneath it. Fredrique swiftly bared his sword, slashing at the air furiously, passing deftly through the beast's clawed defense and gashing several chunks out of its hide before it could strike back. Blood sprayed the air, and I rose to my feet as a half dozen more stone-skinned creatures fell from the sky, leaving their sentry in the buttresses above.

Tatiana fired a flurry of arrows at them as they descended, striking one of them in its leathery wing, its bulk crashing into the ground, shattering limbs and casting its life to the winds. All that lay in its place was a pile of rubble, the sundering powers that animated it gone forever. I pulled my greatsword from the sheath on my back and cleaved another creature in two before turning my attention to the others that flanked us on the left side. I knew we were outnumbered and outclassed the second the attack had begun, but our well-trained reactions gave us enough time for a quick escape. Karennia threw a blanketing shadow over the area, allowing us to disappear under its protective folds. We ran down the twisting streets, losing our way within minutes.

"They won't be far behind. We need to get into a defensible position!" said Fredrique.

"They have wings," Tatiana continued, "we need to get underground. They won't have an advantage there."

The strategy was sound. I flipped a calcified grate that lay to the side of the street and guarded the opening as my companions dropped within. I saw the hovering shadow of the gargoyles as I stepped into the void and fell into the depths of the city of Capal.



Gargoyles

Created by the Melanis, the Gargoyles fly high above the Cht'aux, spying down on any strange occurrences that may be taking place on the streets below.

They often swoop down and destroy small groups of serfs and anything else that gets too close to the Melanis headquarters without invitation. They are all individual in design and trying to discern a standard appearance, outside of wings and sharp claws, is a waste of time. When not patrolling they sit atop the corners of buildings, awaiting their next victim.

Highlights: Fierce, Looming, Shadowy

Attributes: AGI 2, BLD 4, FIT 2, INS 2, PER 3, WIL 2, STA 35, UD 7

Skills: Camouflage 1/+2, Combat Sense 2/+3, Dodge 1/+2, Hand-to-Hand 3/+2

Weapons: Claws UD+10, Bite UD+8, Stone Skinned (AR 15)

I. The Masker's Tale
Into the Darkness

The catacombs that confronted us were far different than I had imagined. They were not the desolate remains of a world forgotten, like the Undercity of Vimary. Here, there were signs of life all around us, if it could be called such a thing as "life." Huddled figures slid about the perspiring halls, a look of complete hopelessness written over their scarred and disfigured faces. The stench was cloying, their sickly bodies trading diseases with the other inhabitants as they shuffled aimlessly. We avoided their touch, afraid of whatever sickness was hidden beneath their moisture-laden cloaks or lingering on their virulent skin. The taint was all around us.

The creatures that had just attacked us above did not pursue, and we were thankful for that. I remained at the rear of the group, ready to warn against any ambushes from behind or other possible stalkers that may have been keeping track of our movements. We navigated the halls, torches lit, for a short while before discovering a wonder that was most unexpected. From the vantage of a jutting balcony, we saw below us a collection of blister-like structures that housed hundreds, if not thousands, of people. The cavern was massive in proportions, spinal bridges crisscrossing arterial streams at its lowest levels, colorful fungi growing over everything. Small bulbous huts — some suspended by ligaments, others supported by thick vertebrae — rose above the fertile ground below. It was an entire city of humans, all enslaved to the Z'bri. Despite the dismal surroundings and the abject wretchedness of the inhabitants, I felt a surge of excitement. We had found something that we had been led to believe did not exist.

"Karennna, this is amazing! This must be where the dreamers are," Fredrique exclaimed.

"I feel the dreamer's call, but it is not from here. It comes from within the heart of this wicked place, and I fear that we must continue further into the city itself. We need to find a passage onwards. Much as I would like to explore and uncover the secrets here before us, it is not our destination. These things must wait."

I saw that Tatiana was disappointed with Karennna's insight. The hamlet below was a perfect example of where our Herite companion believed her personal quest could be fulfilled, but Karennna always knew best. We scanned our surroundings, looking for the nearest way to get down, finding it in a jagged stair-lined slope carved from the towering walls.

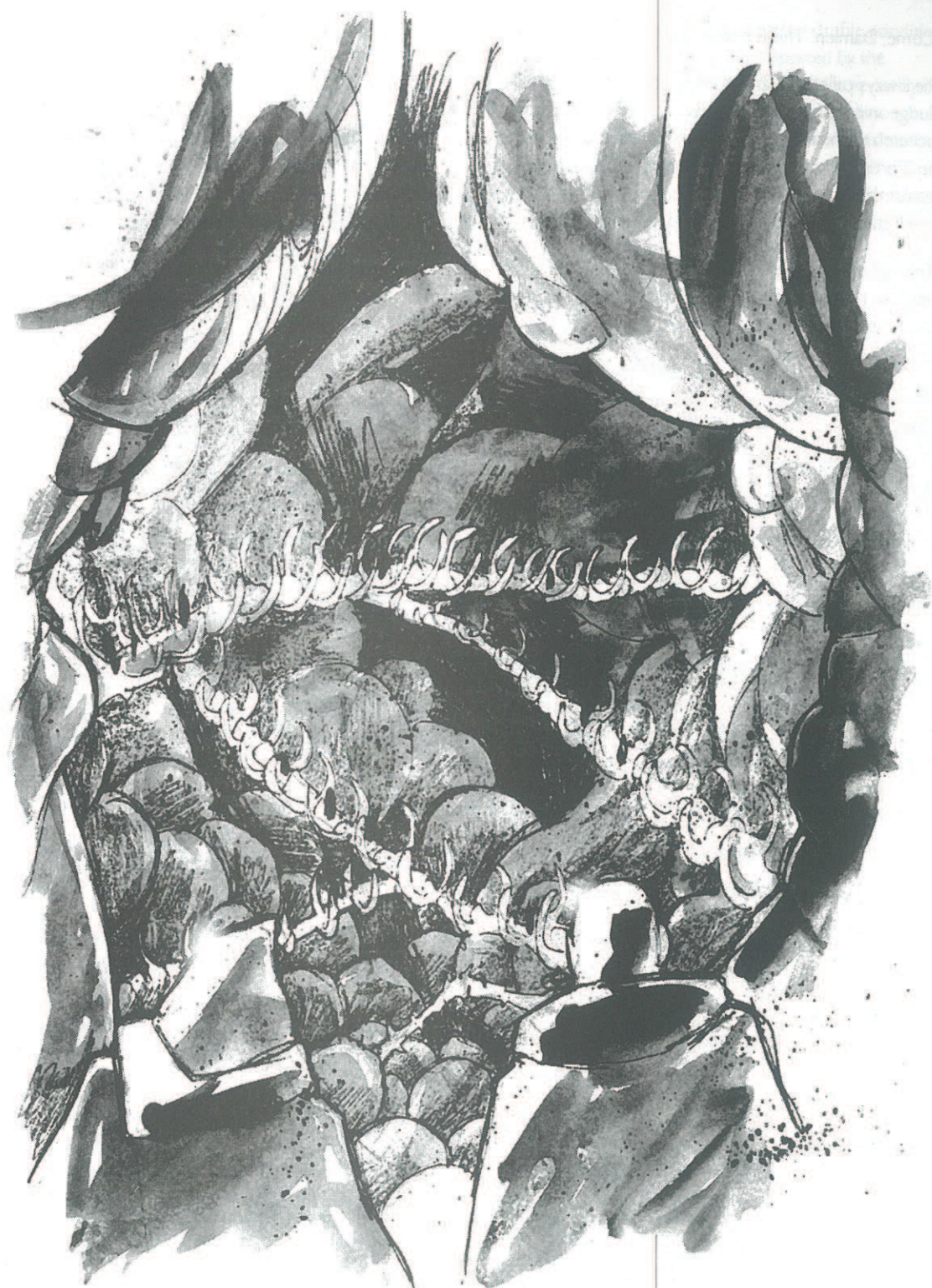
The descent was tricky and caused us some delay, but, in the end, we found ourselves safely at the base of the cavern. We worked our way through the center of the hamlet, it being the fastest way to the opposite side where we supposed our quest for the dreamers could continue. Karennna remained slightly removed from us, intent on keeping attuned to the energy that drew us onwards. She stopped often, making sure that we were heading in the right direction, sometimes muttering some rites that kept us safe from the dehumanizing atmosphere.

Tatiana gazed curiously at the Serfs who avoided our contact equally as much as we avoided theirs. I could see in her eyes the empathy she felt for their hapless souls forced into a communal body of shared organs and fractured minds.

Fredrique kept a wary, guarded stance, prepared to defend our cell against another surprise attack should such an occurrence take place. His senses were alert, awakened in a way that only a warrior can know. I checked my own state of readiness, making sure that I was fully capable of protecting my comrades against any danger at a moment's notice.

The travel through the hamlet did not impede us, but, just as we managed to get to the other side, a massive swarm of insects descended from the mist that hung in the air far above. There was intelligence to the buzzing and a resonating reply from within the vast cavern, a humming that spoke in a language we could not understand. It was as if the whole place was alive.

The Serfs came out of their hovels with the arrival, looking skywards to the insects like it was a visit from a heavenly source, albeit a vile one. Their eyes were transfixed on the cloud of insects that moved and flowed like reeds on the river's shore. We looked upwards, intrigued and frightened by the sudden appearance of so alien an entity. Never had I heard such a sound, and it made me hesitate, transfixed by the rhythmic patterns of the swarm's dance and the throbbing of the cavern itself. I stopped for an instant, unable to concentrate or think clearly until I heard Karennna speak to me in a gentle voice.



Soulmates

"Come, Damien. This is not your place, heart. Take my hand, and I will lead you."

She always called me "heart" when she wanted me to listen closely to what she was saying. Despite the Atmosphere's bludgeoning contamination, I was able to take her hand while she led our cell out of the place that almost caused me to succumb to the taint. So quickly it could have happened, my life, *our life*, my identity, *our identity*, my soul, *our soul*, all lost to the Z'bri's ever-present evil. That event changed my life forever, giving me the conviction to always maintain. . . vigilance against the beasts. We didn't remember what happened directly after that, but when I awoke from the numbness, I found myself staring at Karennia, her hand rubbing an ointment on my forehead while the others looked on.

"This will make you feel better," she said. "Do not rub it off. I know what you're thinking, Damien. I can see the worry in your eyes. But I assure you, the obstacles we have overcome only warn of the ones that we have yet to face. We must stay strong. Have trust in our cell. Have faith in the Prophecy."

"I do, Karennia," I replied. "We will always believe. They are playing with our minds, though. They know where we are weak, and it's only a matter of time. How much of it do we have before they break our spirits and reap our souls for their own? If it weren't for you, Karennia, we would have never escaped. We are so pleased to have escaped."

Karennia locked my eyes with her own dark pools and spoke to me in a way that language was incapable of translating. I stroked her face and stood up from my stupor, rubbing my fingers and thumb of my free hand against my temple to help clear my senses. What was this city doing to us? I felt worn out, without motivation — and angry because of it. That wasn't like me.

Heart's Blood

Before we were well into the tunnels on the other side of the hamlet, Fredrique noticed that we were being followed. We carried on, quickening our pace, but it was obvious that they were tracking us better than we could reasonably evade in the unknown catacombs of Capal. Tatiana took the point, leading us into the lower levels of a structure that likely rose many levels above ground. There were stairs a short distance away, and it was there that we set up for an ambush.

Tatiana readied her arrows, stringing her bow with one smooth motion. Fredrique and myself took opposite sides of her, creating a funnel for whatever opposition was about to enter into our little trap. Karennia started the motions that would allow her to aid us with Dream Synthesis once the assault began. We set our torches close to the hall near the stairs, allowing us enough light to see our hunters, but not enough for them to see us.

We waited for the span of a held breath before the group walked right into our midst, unprepared and vulnerable. Karennia screamed out a warning seconds before we could act. "No! Stop. Don't attack!" Before us stood a Tribal Circle, injured and dying from wounds received in what appeared to have been a battle in which they had not fared well. Tatiana continued to hold her bow tight, arrow nocked, while she stepped out, assessing the group.

"Who are you? Speak quickly," She said. "We will not hesitate if you threaten us."

"We are from Vimary, and we need your help," said a Sheban who appeared to be in command.

"What are you doing so far from Tribal lands? I thought your edicts forbade such lengthy travels," Tatiana continued.

"Please, we need some water to clean our wounds. We will explain, all in due time. Will you help us or shall we be denied our last chance at survival?"

I stepped forward before my companions could answer. "Yes, we . . . will help you. But only under the condition that whatever authority you have over your little troupe has absolutely no bearing on us. Understood?"

In Dignity's Absence

The Sheban nodded, calling for his injured circle to enter the room and rest their tired bodies. They were in horrible condition, six of them in all. A Dahlian dressed in dark robes fringed with black tassels entered first, his frail form supported by the Sheban. They took to a spot near a cracked wall and unrolled a dusty blanket. The two of them were followed immediately by a Magdalite couple, both dressed in tight, brown leather gear that was at once practical and fashionable, although any aesthetic benefits were tarnished by the long faces worn on the countenance of the lovers. A youthful Yagan who was easily the tallest of the group stooped through the archway, her lanky, lithe body hindered by a deep-set fatigue. Finally, there was an Evan, the markings on his face obviously those of a Shaman on a spirit quest. It seemed to me that his misadventure had gotten the better of him, as he nursed what appeared to be a dislocated shoulder.

They dumped what little weapons and equipment they had upon the floor and then slumped onto the blanket.

Fredrique questioned the Sheban. "What happened to your Rangers?" he asked.

"We are a chosen circle, not petty hunters," said the Sheban. "There were none among us."

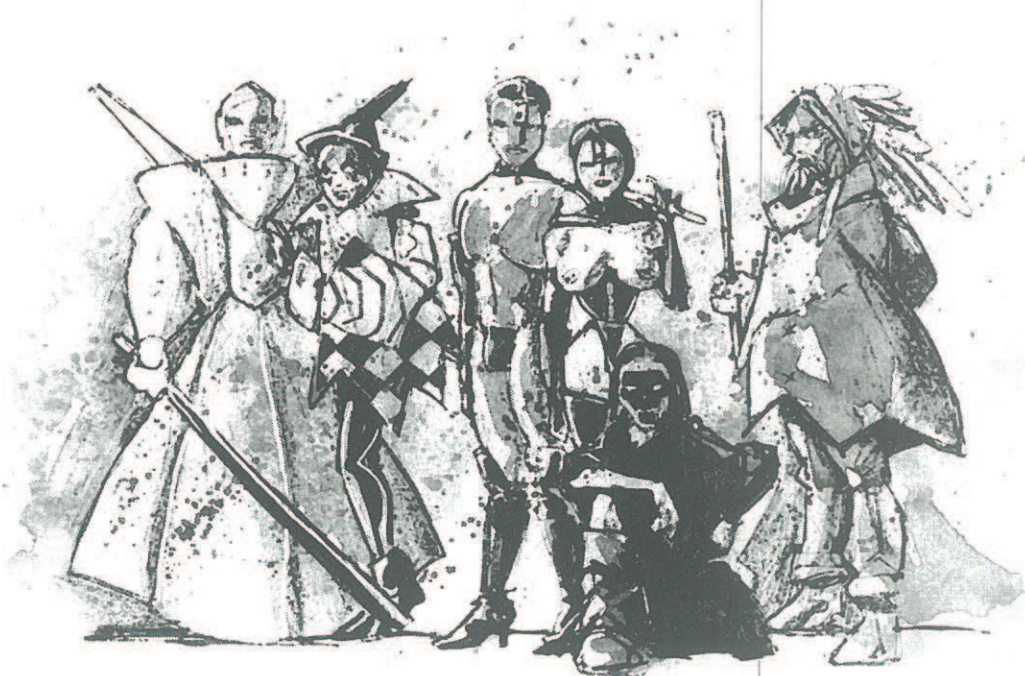
"That's foolish," said Fredrique, as a matter of fact. "No wonder you're in such poor condition. What happened?"

"We were overcome by a Koleris Pack after stumbling upon them. We were lucky to escape at all, but they seemed intent on other things," replied the Sheban.

"So you were lucky then. Count your blessings. You may not have many left," said Tatiana, while she poured water over a festering slash on the Dahlian's arm.

"Tatiana. Refrain," said Karennia. "We are all here together, now. Let us make the most of what the Goddess has given us."

Karennia's words silenced us all. We could all use some rest, and the room we were in was a good location to gather our wits before once again setting off. We spoke to the Tribal Circle, since it seemed we now had a batch of incompetents to take care of, but I kept my suspicions about their true purpose quiet. Why would a Tribal Circle risk coming this far north? It wasn't a question I figured they would answer, so I didn't ask, but later, their desires became all too clear. We were pleased.



1. The Masker's Tale
Souls Light

From the Legends of Chantalle, Diplomat of Magdalen

The Fallen were not the only ones who liberated me, and the meeting of L'Etoiles des Esprits with the Tribal Circle, two groups opposed under any other circumstances, showed me that we cannot take the gift of life for granted. Through desperation to survive, the truest of enemies came to see eye to eye, if only for a little while. Some took more from the experience than others did, of course, and it is the tale of the Sheban named Travis Dan'on that I shall recount for you now. He came to a decision that was inevitable for one who was faced what he did, and you will understand that, often, we do not fully comprehend the task set out for us until we venture where we never thought possible.

Dark Pilgrimage — Tale of the Tribes

From the confessions of Travis Dan'on, Sheban Lorekeeper

I hadn't been so elated since my coming of age ceremony. Most recently, I had been given the authority to oversee the formation of a Tribal Circle, my influence with the Terasheban Elders reaping me some small matter of authority. I was both honored and relieved that I was chosen, since I had been fearing, of late, the hand of my mother, her wrath capable of making even a High Judge tremble. She was accusing me of being complacent and apathetic towards my clan responsibilities, sometimes complaining quite vocally and in front of important guests, like the Dan'on and Seth'on Elders. The look on her face after I returned from the Grand Council and told her that I was to leave, come the new season, on a quest to the Outlands that I am sworn not to reveal, was more reward than I could ever have asked. It still brings a smile to my lips.

I had the next few weeks of spring to assess and interview those considered worthy enough to accompany me. The Grand Council had assured me that each of the Sisterhoods of the Tribes had been notified of my coming and were duly prepared. My first stop was to be Mortuary, followed by Xstasis, then Sanctuary, before returning to Bazaar where a Dahlian guide known as Jordan was to be met. Upon reaching the Yagan lands, I was greeted by the shattered dome peeking over the low fog that clung to the earth and gave a foreboding air to the surroundings. The lands that belonged to the Tribe of Death were not a welcome place for outsiders, and I felt no more welcome despite my holy task.

Wisdom of the Elders

I met with the Old One named Thamus early in the afternoon. He was awaiting me in a stone building of relatively small proportions, overgrown with vines and surrounded by gravestones that were obviously untended as weeds and tall grass grew freely all around. Despite the warmth from the afternoon sun, the inner chamber was damp and cold, a trail of mist lingering with each breath. I rubbed my hands together to help warm them as I descended the wide, shelved stairs. Candles burned throughout the room, supported in skulls of questionable origin. Thamus sat cross-legged in one corner of the room, a full pot boiling in front of him that he picked up and quickly drank from with a bleached-white ladle, seemingly unaware of the scalding qualities that were evident from the billows of steam which rose around him. Gulping back the elixir and letting out a heavy breath, he rose up swiftly. Despite his overripe age, it wasn't a great feat for the old man, as Thamus stood only as tall as my waist.

He approached me directly; his one hand blocking some unseen light from entering his cataract-plagued eyes, his other creased hand reaching out to feel for my precise location. I stood unwavering before him. He grabbed my cowl abruptly and tugged on it with bulging knuckled fingers, unsettling my stance and causing me to take a step forward in order to keep my balance. Then he tugged again. He continued to do so until he was physically leading me around the chamber, all the while muttering nonsensical words to an unseen listener who was — from what I could gather — arguing with him! I kept silent, knowing that despite this eccentric behavior, he deserved the respect that his status as an Old One demanded.

Ritual's Strength

We did at least three complete circuits of the chamber before he released me and sent me headlong into the ornate stone coffin that rose from the center. I managed to brace myself with my hands to keep the wind from being knocked from my lungs.

"You will have Yuma accompany you on your quest, Sheban. She will make certain the spirits guard you and the others; although, from what *he* is saying, it may not be the best place for you to go."

I stared blankly at Thamus. "Who is saying? Where are we going and . . . how do you know?"

"That is all," he replied. "Gather your things and she will meet you before you leave tonight. Yes, I know. I told him that already, but who is he to listen? He is only a young, foolish child with the brains the size of an ant. I told you that there were others involved but did you listen? Noooo . . . you never listen, but I still tolerate you."

"Who are you talking to?"

Thamus leaned against the stone sarcophagus, his lips pursed, his brow furrowed, upset that I had interrupted him. He turned his head from one side and then to the other, as if looking to others for approval, before lifting his hand and firmly pointing to the exit behind me. I left without any further questions.

In short order, I discovered Yuma was not who I had expected to have first join the circle. She was young, for one thing, and I specifically asked for a Yagan who held notable wisdom. Her lack of markings showed her to have limited knowledge of rituals, and her rather sparse set of medallions did not bolster my confidence. She was too thin as well, something that was entirely unrelated to the task at hand but that bothered me nonetheless. To top off the whole fiasco, I did not even have a chance to interview her to see if she was what I wanted for the Circle. I was in command of this mission and I was damned if the Yagans were going to make a joke of it.

I ordered Yuma to dictate to me her known rites and rituals so that I could log them in my journal for future reference. Of course, I was finished almost before I had begun. The ink on my quill pen was still wet from the first dip, the scant few lines staring back at me, lonely, on a parchment that remained, for the most part, empty. Angered, I told her we needed to make haste and get to Xstasis before nightfall. I swear I saw her smirk under that blasted hood.



Cold Caress

Yuma was the dullest company I had kept in a long time. I paid her no heed once we departed, my mind intent on reaching Xstasis in order to interview the candidates there. The Towers of the Magdalites' homeland had always held an ethereal beauty for me, although I still felt them to be rather impractical. Was there really any reason to have sculpted hedges blocking the entranceway to council chambers? Frivolous to say the least.

It was far too late to conduct any interviews by the time Yuma and I arrived, so a Concubine showed me to my chambers for the evening. She offered to stay and see to any needs I may have had during the night, but I was far too preoccupied with reviewing a list of priorities I had created for any such distractions. I was well prepared to assert my authority the next day and only allow those capable of enduring the journey ahead to become a part of the circle. With those thoughts in my head, I fell into a blissful sleep.

I was disturbed in the middle of the night by soft hands running up my legs. I awoke from a dream, quickly recollecting my whereabouts and rose up in my bed. Under the covers, a comely young man attended to me quite expertly while another gently stroked my neck, the tingling in my body increasing with each delicate caress.

"We are appointed to your Circle, Dan'on. We hope that you are pleased and that this *interview* is to your liking."

I looked down my body towards him and understood the seduction, yet I couldn't find it within myself to voice my disapproval. I would let the Magdalites have their way with me for now, but, once we were outside their borders, the tables would be turned. They were better company than Yuma, however, and I spoke at length with them over breakfast the next morning within my chamber.

"Our councils are different than yours, granted, but they serve their purpose. Wouldn't you agree?" said Terrance, his soft supple lips closing with just a hint of moisture trapped upon them.

I raised my glass to him, swirling the heady potion within before taking a liberal swig. "Formality and tradition are in the eyes of the beholder," I replied. I don't know what came over me during the time I spent in Xstasis. I just couldn't bring myself to disagree with anything the Magdalites said.

"Gerard and I will be most helpful to you on this mission, Travis," Terrance continued. "The Sisterhood has told us the sensitive nature of it but, I must admit, why hasn't there been something done of this before?"

I sighed, softly. "You are well aware of the sanctions placed against traveling north of Vimary. Also, while the Fatimas have been able to keep the calls from reaching Vimary, through alternate means that I am sure you are aware of, they fear that the increasing strength of these unknown signals may soon filter in. The risk is great and news of this may threaten the sanctity of our people. Hence, the source must be discovered so that prudent action can be taken. It is a great honor."

"Indeed. Gerard and I have heard rumors of potential dreamers outside Vimary, mainly from our Diplomats, but from so far to the north? Can there be any truth to it? How do we know it isn't just a trick placed by the Z'bri or the Eighth Tribe?"

"We don't. But from what I have been told, this call is different. The Grand Council has secretly ordered us to go, and the Wise Mother Herself has visited my dreams. We must heed our Fatimas' words to prosper and, as a Sheban, it is my duty to lead the Nation into order."

I was glad that the Magdalites listened to my words while I carried on. It made me regain faith in my mission. Gerard and Terrance smiled at me while I explained the details. What delicate, sweet smiles they had.

My Mother's Child

With the Circle almost complete, we entered the fertile lands of Sanctuary and the mud-hut village of Heather. It was bland, like any other Evan village, made of the soil's gifts and kept by an abundance of harvested goods from the surrounding fields. Not that I didn't appreciate the work that the Evans did; after all, they fed and maintained the Nation with their wealth. Their role was necessary, despite the dullness of it all. I glanced around, looking at the multitude of workers who were toiling in the fields while other Evans were weaving baskets, grinding wheat, sculpting clay, all chores that they took such pride in. I focused my attention, however, as my interests lay at the heart of the village.

I called from outside the village Shaman's abode, asking for his presence. He parted the grass curtain hanging in the entrance, a heavy, sweet smelling smoke escaping from behind him. He then grabbed a walking staff from the base of the three short stairs that led from his door to the ground and moved towards us. I bowed slightly when he came before me, more out of habit than respect. With his eyes closed, he stepped in close, reeking of smoking weed. In a voice that was well rehearsed to strike awe into the ignorant, he spoke. "I have heard the spirits' call." He raised his arms skyward, shaking with an unseen power. "They told me of your coming." I rolled my eyes. "I shall accompany your circle to the land of the chill wind where the damned roam the endless waste." We had gathered a sizable crowd of bumpkins by this time, Hawthorn's drama causing quite the disruption. "My quest is woven with your own, Sheban. Our purpose is one."

I sighed and realized that there was no arguing with him. A Shaman who believed himself to be on a spiritual quest was not someone who could be reasoned with. I nodded my head slowly in acquiescence and then looked to the moon that was still visible in the daytime sky.

"We leave from Bazaar in a fortnight," I said to him. "Make certain you are prepared."

It seemed the list of questions that I had toiled over was more than useless by now. I was taught that an organized Sheban is a wise Sheban. Too bad the other Tribes were not taught the same. I strolled over to a fire where a rotund lady was cooking husked corn and tossed it into the flames, the parchments that I had slaved over burning away in an instant.

"Once we leave Vimary," I whispered from under my breath, "then I will be in charge."

Guide and Guardian

"So, do you have any questions? Isn't there an interview or anything?"

I could have just screamed. The Dahlian somehow knew that all my work was wasted on the list — the one I had burned two weeks prior. "No. Nothing that will keep you from joining the circle; but I need to know, in no uncertain terms, that you are familiar with the northern country."

"Familiar as my own mother," replied the Dahlian. "So where are we going and what are we doing once we get there?"

"We are going downriver, and that is all you need to know," I replied. "At least for now. The rest of the details will come in due time." I trusted Dahlians even less than a class of overly ambitious Advocates, so I didn't divulge too much information. "Did your caravan leader provide the equipment we asked for?"

"It's all waiting: the boat, the furs, the supplies and the wards. So whenever you're ready to go, we can get underway."

I explained that we were to exit from Vimary without a trace, stressing that the secrecy of the mission was paramount. Jordan understood well enough, assuring me that his caravan leader knew nothing more than he did. We moved through the familiar structures of Vimary, first passing through Bazaar, then Playground, always keeping to the main streets and mingling easily with the crowds before heading along the eastern shores of the Sunken City. I glanced back at the Tribal lands, perhaps for the last time, realizing that the duty I was about to perform was the greatest thing I was ever going to do. I whispered the prayer of the Lorekeepers, my heart devoted to Tera Sheba the Wise, and then followed Jordan to his caravan where our final rites were made.

 Call of the North Wind

The blasted crags of the Northern Wind shot out of the earth like jagged swords, the sharp-edged stone cutting at our flesh whenever the smallest of slips or the slightest of falters were made. We had passed the safety of our homeland, the landscape becoming more twisted and corrupt with each day. How I wish that we could have remained in the relative safety of the longboat. If only the water, that had carried us so far, could have reversed its direction and swept us home.

I pondered about our predicament while the camp was being set for the night. Jordan directed the others the way he did each evening before scouting the surrounding forest, making sure that we were not vulnerable to the creatures of the wild.

I kept my knees folded into my stomach, the position easing the pain that nagged incessantly. The cramping had been with me since we fell into the foul waters several days past, after the overwhelming current ran the boat uncontrollably into the rocky shore. Hawthorn was useless at the paddle, his error costing us all dearly. The frigid, swirling waters engulfed us while we struggled to reclaim the equipment that drifted downstream. The longboat lay shattered in the water, the breach in its hull causing it to dive under the waves within minutes.

I didn't blame the Shaman outright for his bungling, knowing that nothing could be done except look forward to the long days ahead. I came to understand that he did indeed have a connection with the very call we were trying to suppress, and his abilities at tracking it were going to be important later on.

Ever since that moment, however, the journey choked at our wills and weakened us with its challenges. Not a single thing we did was done with ease. There was hatred in the air, an aroma of malevolence that grew out of the land and struck us with each breath. I felt separated from the truth in my soul; left only with an empty void that my mind filled with feelings that I struggled to repress. Why could I not feel Tera Sheba's love within me? Where was the Goddess in all of this chaos? What was our purpose? Even I was beginning to forget.

I thought of all these things and more while I sat by the fire, nursing the tenderness in my gut caused by the water's illness. I also listened to the others whisper in the night while they believed I was asleep, drugged from an elixir that I had been freely consuming on a daily basis prior to that listless night.

He sleeps now, my love. What shall we do with him once our goal is reached? We only have enough mixture for another half-moon.

My dear Gerard. All is going according to plan. Travis is only a pawn, chosen by us. Have you forgotten? Do not think that he has any authority out here. We will take care of loose ends once the awakened has been found. We need someone to blame after all is said and done and who better than an incompetent Dan'on? The Masters have spoken. They told me that the one we seek awaits a sign of forgiveness from the Goddess. She awaits liberation, but we know well that only the pure are truly free. There is a role for her in all of this, rest assured of that, but that is for the Lover to decide. We spent far too long outside the shores of Vimary, wrongly punished for our ambition, to lose hold of an opportunity like this. This is our chance to return as true lovers to our Fatima, free from the mar that we carry as outsiders. In the meantime, keep the Dan'on swine distracted, like you have been doing. Make certain he continues to drink the elixir, rich in Maple's Blood and Spring Cress. We cannot afford to make any mistakes.

Understood. However, the Yagan worries me, as well. I have heard her talking with the Sheban, telling him things that I fear may undermine us in the end, although he pays her little heed. Yuma seems to know more than she is letting on. She is too relaxed in this place. More so than a Yagan should be. I heard her the other night, while she was keeping watch during the midnight sky. She was performing a rite deep in the woods, a stone's throw away from camp. I wandered out there, a foolish thing I know, but I needed to know what she was up to for all of our safety. I saw her standing in a circle of stones, disrobed and covered in markings that I hadn't seen before. I felt cold, like I was surrounded by the spirits of the dead. How is it that she can call on the powers of her Fatima so far from Vimary? I thought we had ensured that this sort of thing could not take place.

We will need to keep an eye on her from now on, then. Now let us keep quiet. Jordan returns from his sentry.

Beauty's Betrayal

Yuma's early warnings did not register with me, until I heard the liars that night. I was being played for a fool by the ones that I had trusted the most. They were nothing but criminals paying their price by serving their Fatima in the Outlands. Why had I not seen it before? The markings never lied.

The next morning, while we carried on through the broken, mountainous terrain, Yuma walked beside me. I looked to her, angry that she was not who I had first assumed. I was a Sheban, a Lorekeeper. I was supposed to be able to know these things.

"I know," I said, keeping my eyes fixed on the ground in front of me.

"Take this." She pulled a knotted series of river reeds from her pouch. "It will allow the unseen to protect you."

Only a day prior, I would have tossed the crude necklace into the stream beside me but instead, after what I had learned from the previous night, I took it from her hand and placed it around my neck, hiding it under my cloak.

"Why are you helping me after the way I treated you?" I asked.

"Because there is more going on here than your own quest, Travis. Fate has a hand in everything. Have faith that your prayers will not go unheeded. Your connection is weak out here, but for how long remains to be seen. I haven't seen the same vision for the others as I've seen for you. What this means, I cannot truthfully say. What I do know is that Tera Sheba has chosen you for a reason, much as my own Fatima has. They always do."

I let Yuma's words sink in, stopping on the trail while I watched her continue to navigate the steep slope ahead. It was then that I realized just how blind I had been to the truth.



First Blood

The river opened up into a massive bay, flanking the south side of an infernal city that lay in the distance. We were still far from reaching it, however, as it was approximately a half-day's hike further from our position. The thick frost, covering the surrounding land like a blanket, hid the true nature of the diseased landscape. Only with the warming of the day, which was slight but allowed the mist to dissipate somewhat, did we fully realize how much sorrow was emanating from the soil. Hawthorn spoke of it as an injury to the Life Giver for such a blasphemy to exist. His words were passionate, although the fatigue of travel on the both his spirit and body were evident to us all.

Our approach took us into a plain that led to a jungle of serrated stakes, each protruding many man-lengths in height from the ground, wrapped in ligaments made of a shiny black carapace that pulsed like choked arteries whenever we went near them. We soon found ourselves deep within the dark fingers, the earth floor itself cracked with lines, the ever-present cold never allowing the soil to recover from winter's locking grip. We stayed close together, afraid that separation, even for the blink of an eye, would allow the surrounding evil to somehow consume us. We stopped at one point, Jordan's hand rising in warning, freezing us where we stood.

"Listen," he whispered. "There is something approaching. Fast. We must hide."

I drew my spear from the leather binds on my back, holding it white-knuckled in my hands. I leaned against one of the spikes in my attempt at making myself unseen, an accident that I would soon come to regret. I heard a series of quick cracking sounds, like the noise trees make in the harshest of winter's ice storms. I looked slowly, hesitantly, toward the loathsome spike that my left shoulder rested upon and saw the outer shell throbbing rhythmically from my contact. A bulge ran along it from the ground, moving upwards to where my weight pressed on the plant. I didn't say a word, only watched, my heart racing with fear.

One of the carapace shells that protected the thin layered flesh of the living spike cracked from the arrival of a parasitic creature underneath its skin, a tendrill peaking out, smelling the air. Before I could react, the world around me exploded into a sea of tentacles, all lashing at my face. I felt sharp razors cutting at my clothing, slashing at me from the maw of the creature that sprang forth. I raised my spear in weak defense, but too late to be effective against the savage assault. It wrapped its tendrils around my neck, small lacerations bleeding from the sharp edges of the tentacles. Seconds before it could smash a trio of dagger-like teeth into my skull, it shrieked, letting go of its grip on me and writhing on the ground at my feet. I felt the reeds Yuma had given me throbbing with the River of Dream.

Strength in Numbers

Hawthorn rushed to my side, grabbing my arm and yanking me from the flailing attack of the pestilent insect. I gasped for air. Jordan swept his sword at the massive blood-covered mite, cleaving it in two, releasing a yellow fluid from its belly. Before we had a chance to recover, a wave of beasts overcame us, with the eyes of predators intent on one thing.

It was a vicious pack of Koleris, signaled somehow of our position. Perhaps the parasite was an early warning system, or the valley itself was alive. I dove to the side as the hulking form of a six-armed devil lifted Hawthorn from where he stood and pulled his arms outwards with a sickening expertise. The Shaman fell to the ground, his arms limp at his side while he struggled to get up and escape, flopping like a fish out of water. I saw another creature envelop Terrance with a cloak made of thorns, a million tiny cuts tearing open on the Magdalite's soft flesh. I heard him scream and I heard the beast howl in pleasure from the anguish caused. I felt Gerard's blood splatter my face as a quadruped fiend snapped its hammered jaw onto the fingers of his right hand, crushing them in an instant. He stood, dazed, staring at the remains of his hand as the blood ran freely over his arm. Jordan was tossed to the ground with the flick of a claw, the ribs in his chest cracking; the lungs secure within them expunging a needed breath. He gasped for air on the ground, the pain overwhelming his senses. Yuma was yelling something out, but I couldn't hear her chant. There was no sound, only the sight of pure chaos. All I could see was that the demons were all around us. Then, I saw the voracious eyes in front of me. I screamed.

The Gates Open

We were running for our very lives, each of us injured, but only to the point that would cause us as much pain as possible without utterly destroying us. They were toying with us, enjoying our torment, giving them more strength than a quick death ever could. Despite knowing that we were prolonging our own suffering by doing so, we ran. There was nothing else we could do. Death is never a welcome sight when it is staring you in the face.

I can not say for certain what made the ferocious creatures stop, but I can venture to guess that the fiendish howl that carried over the wind was not unimportant. They looked . . . disappointed, much in the same way a child does when she has been told to go inside after a full day of squishing the ants on the green. It didn't make me feel any better.

The majority of them left as quickly as they came, leaving us in poor condition to carry on our quest. But what choice did we have? The stalkers they left behind, a pair of long, eight-legged creatures that resembled spiders, herded us towards the city. We could not change our direction; our one and only attempt at doing so resulting in the explosion of corrosive venom from the mouth of one of the creatures. Jordan barely escaped the blast, as the splashing fluid sundered the spike nearest him.

Battered and worn, we carried on to the city of Capal, not even stopping to bandage our festering wounds. The outskirts showed signs of massive battles, as though a war was being waged on an almost daily basis. Open graves, running the length and breadth of the outer wall, littered with the bodies of countless serfs, each one in a different state of decomposition, were attended to by what could only be called harvesters. They looked to be humans who were picking apart the bodies of the dead, placing the ripe portions carefully into baskets that were woven of the very substance gathered. They had no remorse, showed no hesitation to their actions as they went about their tasks. I clasped my stomach, still tender from my illness and wounds. I fell to the tainted soil in pain, both physically and mentally drained.

Yuma grabbed my hand and raised me from the ground. If she hadn't, I would have remained lying there, eventually to have been harvested myself. We walked through the serfs, their soulless eyes intent on their personal duties, paying us no heed. The crunching of the bodies beneath our feet kept me from looking down, the stalkers forcing us onwards.





Stalkers

Strange creatures of unknown origin, they have survived for longer than any Z'bri can remember. None can say for certain which House created these beasts, as they represent each one in small ways. Long-legged creatures, they roam the outskirts of Capal, herding stragglers - Serf or otherwise - back into the city proper. They do this in a synchronized manner, communicating telepathically with each other much like the Flemis do. The

Stalkers have savagely sharp appendages and can spit bileous venom from their mouths. They do not attack unless their "herd" wanders, in which case they only engage to whatever degree is necessary to, once again, get their quarry heading towards Capal.

Highlights: Alien, Single-minded, Frightening

Attributes: AGI +3, BLD +2, FIT +1, INS +3, PER +1, WIL +2, STA 30, UD 5

Skills: Camouflage 1/+3, Combat Sense 2/+1, Dodge 1/+3, Hand-to-Hand 2/+3, Sneak 2/+3

Weapons: Claws UD+8, Bite UD +6, Bileous Venom (Burn rating 4-use the fire rules, Rulebook, p. 154) Armored Outer Shell (AR 10)

A Thousand Eyes

We were left alone once we entered the walls of the city, the stalkers retreating to the valley of spears. We knew, as well I am sure they did, we did not have the strength or the resources to escape. The Koleris were still out there, waiting. So we carried on. The streets were desolate. We walked slowly, each one of us too afraid to stop for any reason.

The city was watching us.

Like drones, we went forth, finally taking refuge inside an arched building with a single spire. Its architecture reminded me of some of the buildings in Vimary. The roof rose high above, four separate pillars joining together at the highest point like fingers on praying hands. The far end of the innermost chamber, which also happened to be the most spacious, had the image of a man pinned to a cross raised high up on a wall. I had never seen such an icon and it made me think of Joshua. I don't know why. I hadn't thought of the fallen Fatima in such a personal way before. He was always just a myth to me, a false prophecy to a lost people.

I approached the image, the sculpture calling out to me. I knelt before it and felt the spirits swarm around me, trying to touch me with unseen hands. I heard voices, their lamentations calling for me to save them from this hell. I closed my eyes and listened to them. For once in my life, I truly listened. And I began to weep.

Spirit Call

I felt the energy then. It must have been the Dreaming used by the Doomsayer during her cell's flight. I led the others, following its traces, her spirit calling out to me across the darkness. We entered the winding catacombs of the city, leaving behind the twisting avenues above. None of the others resisted my command when I ordered that we find the source of the disruption. I had a newfound connection with the spirits around us and the others sensed this in me. I knew that I owed it to Yuma initially, but the relationship with them was my own. They knew that my path was intertwined with their own salvation, although the weight of this burden did not present itself fully at the time.

I was glad to find the Fallen cell when we did. I could not have imagined saying that to myself before. I did not feign power over them, or affront them with any indignities. It was not my place to do that out here, yet, somehow, I knew it was theirs.

We journeyed together after that. They healed us enough to allow us to carry on. Hawthorn's shoulders were reset and Jordan was bandaged around his midriff to take the pressure off of his ribs. Gerard had his hand cauterized with flame and then wrapped in an ointment to numb the pain. Yuma seemed to fare the best in retrospect, her power becoming increasingly more apparent to me as time passed on. The Fallen agreed to help us, and I bowed to their authority, telling them that we needed to find the dreamer as much as they did. I knew that the Magdalites had other plans, but it was far too early to reveal my knowledge of their secret agendas just yet. I needed to bide my time and allow them to trust me at my word. Lull them into a feeling that I was still under their control. I had a new sense of purpose. I knew what needed to be done.

Liberation — Tale of the Ending

From the Legends of Chantalle, Diplomat of Magdalen

"They are like angels," said Isa, in her Serf dialect, "come to rescue us from the sins of the Eternal Lords."

Indeed, our liberators did rescue us from the depths of Capal, lifting us from the cell where I had spent unseen seasons. I knew I revolted them with my smell, with the sight of my skin peeling from my bones and open sores leaking pus and blood onto the pure hands that now supported me. I covered my swollen eyes, the torches burning me with their light after having been in darkness for so long. I felt elated knowing that we were finally free, after years of living like caged animals, but I also felt the deepest sense of melancholy, for I was no longer like them. I was but a broken image of my former self, unrecognizable to the eyes of even my own Tribal rescuers. They thought me to be like Isa, a Serf of Capal and, inside, I knew not whether they were wrong in assuming so. I had changed so much.

The Shaman, a powerful dreamer of Eva, held me close to his arms, weeping for my broken soul. He told me that he had heard our call, that he had been waiting for this day all of his life. His feelings poured forth into me, providing me with emotions that I had long thought lost. He said a prayer for the both of us, in Mary's name. A woman, with a voice that was as clear as a chill winter wind, also cleansed us with spiritual words that were spoken as if from the heart of the Goddess. The two of them, strong in the visions of our supplication, had come for us. Isa and I, together, had achieved what we had set out to do. The Goddess had heard our prayers and sent her warriors to see us from damnation.

We hurried away from the stagnant, diseased prison, knowing that there was nowhere safe for us to rest nearby. We scurried through the sinuous alleys of the city, the fresh air cleansing my lungs with each breath. Compared to what I had endured below, the tainted atmosphere of Capal was like a blessing. The Fallen covered my eyes with a thin shawl to protect them from the dim, clouded sky once we reached the streets, but Isa refused to be cared for in the same way. It was obvious that she was not as damaged from the ordeal as I was, which endeared me to her all the more. When my vision finally began to come to focus, some time later, I set my eyes on her for the first time.

Soul's Mother

She was gaunt, with skin that was a patchwork of different tones, as though she had suffered wounds that a single person could not survive and hence had the flesh of others grafted onto her damaged areas. Her eyes were green, but far from natural. They had a yellow tint running through them where there should have been white. Her body was branded with raised cicatrices that ran over her like waves, not unlike the tribal markings we willingly burn upon ourselves. I had felt the scars many times before, although I only realized now the power of expression they held. Despite the superficial ugliness of her form, she was the purest of creatures within. I knew her deepest secrets, as well as her most cherished and feared memories. To me, she was beautiful.

My attention turned back to our liberators who were discussing a way for us to escape the vile city but I stopped them, showing them for the first time who I really was.

"We can't leave," I said. My voice had changed over the years, my accent touched by months of communicating with Isa, a strange mix of my own fluent language with the guttural Serf one. They looked dazed, taken aback by my words. I looked at them blankly as my arms dropping to my sides, too weak to add any strength to my words with gestures that were once so natural to me.

One of the Fallen spoke out. "By the Goddess' light!" She came quickly towards me, placing her hands firmly upon my shoulders, her eyes fixed on my own. "Who are you? What is this?" She looked at the Circle of Tribals, her demeanor revealing dark suspicions. Her face went flush, her hands gripping my flesh, nails cutting into my brittle skin.

"It is not their doing. Not entirely," I said. "We must find safety first — as much as can be had in this place."

Speak Softly Love

Isa was scared by the visible hostility done against me. She trembled beside me, well aware of the tension. She started rambling in her Serf dialect in an attempt to explain things that were beyond her grasp. I could understand her, but the others only saw her as a crazed slave, taken over by some wicked possession. I stepped in front of her, using my last ounce of energy to calm the situation and protect her life.

"There are secrets here that only she knows," I said, motioning to Isa. "Secrets of this place, and what it represents. I have told you, we must find safety — or your quest, your dreams — you will see them all crumble under the weight of your hatred. Please, I beg of you."

The Sheban broke the silence that followed. "The Cathedral, where we rested before. We will be safe there. I don't know why, but I felt like it was a place of calm in the storm. It's not far from where we are now. I, for one, am interested in discovering the truth. I pray that you all feel the same."

Everyone saw the wisdom of the Sheban's words, and I noticed the Yagan smile at him, like he had passed a test of sorts. She looked at me as well, with recognition, like we had known each other for many, many years. Somehow I felt as though the mystery behind my role in Capal was within her knowledge, that the both of us were connected as servants of Fate.

Silently, we crept through the dark, silent streets of Capal. I knew they all wanted answers that only I could give and I was silently reminding myself that, no matter what else took place, I needed to repay Isa for saving me from insanity. I was not sure that I would survive a journey back if we escaped, and the questors from Vimary were my last hope of doing so. But there was more at stake than my own personal survival. Others needed to know.

We reached the Cathedral that the Sheban spoke of, its bell tower sticking out like a bastion of hope in a land of waste. We entered slowly, the Fallen cell quickly securing the area from any lurking dangers. They returned promptly, reporting that the area seemed relatively quiet, although they wisely refrained from putting their weapons at rest.

Thou Hast Forsaken

I took Isa to an undisturbed spot in the Cathedral, near a row of pillars that ran the length of the main hall. The Sheban was right, there was a peace within there, a presence that held no animosity against us like everything else did in Capal. While Isa and I wrapped the cloaks that shielded us from the chill wind around us, I spoke to her, explaining that the Tribals needed to hear her story before anything further could be done for her people. She nodded to me, grasping my hands tightly within her own.

"I am finally on the threshold of being free, but I am scared. I cannot stop shivering. I cannot stop fearing that I may be making a horrible mistake. What if I am wrong?"

"No, Isa. You are not at fault here and you are not wrong. The Z'bri are not deserving of your loyalty, or your guilt. I told you of the land where I came from. It is so different than this place. Help the others understand this as well. It is all that can save your people, now. You are their key to forgiveness." I continued speaking to her in her own tongue, oblivious to the staring Tribals around us. "We called them here. No, you called them here. If it wasn't for you, I would have been lost, but I promised you that I would take you back to where there are others who can help explain this. There are people, powerful dreamers who live amongst the Fallen, who can unlock the power within your soul. It's a rebirth, Isa, a new beginning.

"Tell me the story again. With the others here, ready to listen, I will translate for you, explaining to them in my own tongue both the horror and beauty that you have lived." I hugged her closely, whispering in her ear. "Isa, you are finally free."

She began to weep, tears streaming down her face. It was the first time I had ever seen her cry. It was the first time she ever had.

Martyrs of Madness — Tale of the Serf

From the nightmares of Isa, Serf Dreamer

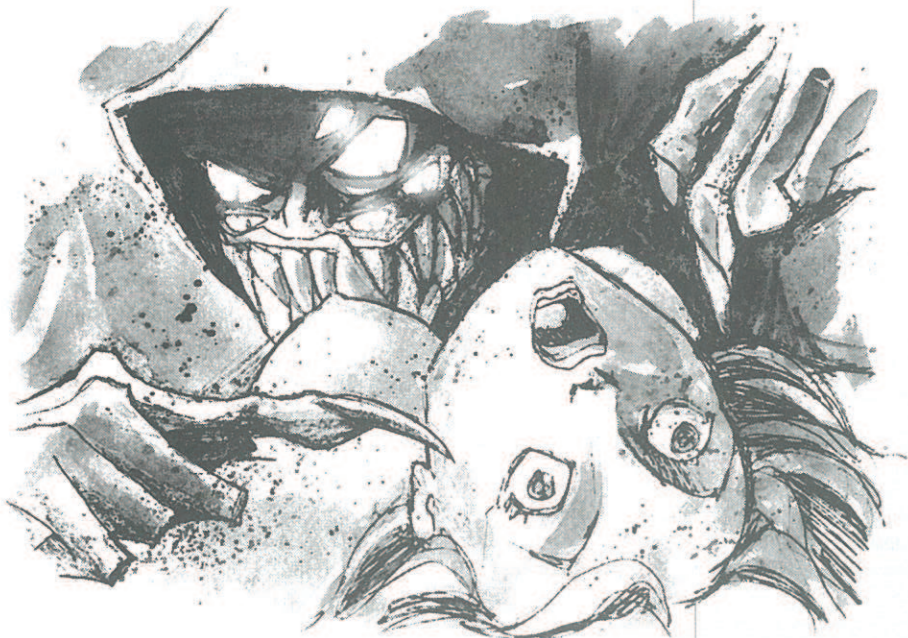
I have lived so many lives. Countless nightmares that haunt me like specters on the periphery of my mind. There was no fear in my black, spiritless heart, no reason to dread the Eternal Masters, for they were my entire world and I only existed to please them. To deny them their wishes was sin, to question their will a blasphemy. I was a Chosen amongst them and so they blessed me. I worshipped them for their favor, and they did not ignore me for such loyalty.

I had the gift of remembrance; aware of whom I was, the Eternal Masters allowing me to hold my memories of the lives before. I had lived as a Sangis whore, a Koleris destroyer, a Melanis acolyte and a Flemis messenger. I was all those things and more; each new experience building upon the next, but forming me into something that they never expected. The Eternal Masters had unintentionally awakened me to a deeper realm of existence, the River of Dream. I felt ashamed, and so never spoke of it, knowing that the gifts they had given me would be taken away if I did. The secret remained within my soul, no matter whom I served or within whatever House I was born.

With each new birth, I would enter the world with strong feelings of having been somewhere else, a place more beautiful than what surrounded me. There were voices speaking to me, spirits telling me that I was capable of going beyond what I knew, that I could reveal a part of myself that resided outside of the Eternal Masters' control. I thought I was going mad, losing touch with reality, but, really, I was getting closer to the heart of my true soul. Despite the voices and the visions that plagued me while I slept, I refused to accept the truth. I was afraid of losing the one thing that I clung to more than anything — the love of my Z'bri lord.

I went to the Iv'chet of my domain, the one who oversaw the hamlet that I once lived in, with a plea for help. I was a Melanis Serf at that time, and Nemerath was pleased that I had come to his minion so quickly. The Count took me aside one night long ago and performed a ritual that would keep me safe from any further corruption by the River of Dream. He would sever my connection with the Lost Souls.

I remember looking at him with such devotion as he placed me on the cold floor of his pitiless chamber deep within the Cht'aux. He dropped small drops of a black, inky fluid over my body that burrowed deep within me, infecting my vessel and scorching my veins. His words were charged and energized with harnessed destruction, as he drew upon the Seed with his sorcerous incantations. I knew that he was trying to save me, preventing me from straying from the true path of a Chosen. I silently thanked him as I lay there, the vile fluid finally suffocating my vital organs as the last breath escaped my lips.



Freedom's Chains



Isa, Koleris Serf of Capal

Isa is slowly awakening to the River of Dream. A Chosen of her kind, she has the ability to retain the memories of her previous incarnations, carrying her soul with her into each new life. She is afraid of what is happening to her, but is only the first sign of something far larger than anyone thought possible.

Highlights: Afraid, Chosen, Destined

Attributes: AGI +1, APP -4, BLD +1, FIT +1, KNO +1, PSY +2, WIL +1

Skills: Athletics 2/+1, Combat Sense 2/0, Dodge 2/+1, Dreaming 1/+2, Hand-to-Hand 2/+1, Intimidate 1/+1, Melee (Bone Weapons) 2/+1, Navigation (Capal's Inner Wall) 2/+1, Survival (Capal) 3/0

I didn't receive the visions for many years after that, and I served the Z'bri with zeal. I was free to behave as I always did, in unquestioning service to my masters. My new lord was Sth'tcak, a Koleris of some import, but I knew that my presence in his domain was more of a status symbol for him than it was for me. I was dubbed Isa, a true name that would remain with me forever, no matter what vessel I inhabited. It was an honor that was rarely given to a Serf and it bolstered the ego of my lord. The packs under him, and even those opposed to his reign, were vying for his recognition. I was a prize that he treated with respect, largely because I had come as a gift from one of the most powerful of the Eternal Masters in Capal, Count Nemerath.

The Serfs of the hamlet treated me with the utmost of respect as well, many of them giving their children to me as tribute. I always took the greatest of pleasures tearing their bodies apart in front of the others. I would kill them slowly, often times murdering those whom I deemed worthy before consuming the choicest parts of their flesh and giving the remains to the families of the sacrificed. This sort of action brought much attention from Sth'tcak, who enjoyed my methods until, one day, he took me to a feast unlike any other.

I was overjoyed at such an invitation. He gouged holes in my knees to set an example for the others, signifying to them the path they needed to walk to become like me. My blood flowed freely from the punctures as my Lord took me to his private hall and threw me on a table of sundered corpses. He stood at one end, watching me as I dove into the shattered bodies with glee, my body shaking uncontrollably from the pleasure of dining in such an exquisite manner. I collapsed on the heap, satiated from the supper. I heard him howl out into the chamber, blood glistening off of his perfect form. I rolled over, my body covered in gore, and looked at him, consumed by his presence. I understood his call. I stood up and grabbed a cracked, jagged bone before striding boldly towards him, scraping bone chips into my face and neck as I went.

He sliced a clean slash through the air when I came before him, severing my free arm from its place, the limb landing on the table in a bloody mess. I raised the bone fragment over my head with my one remaining arm and plunged it deep into Sth'tcak's chest, the crimson, boiling fluid flowing along the shaft of the bone, drenching my legs and torso with its holy substance.

I kneeled before him and accepted the scalding gift as it burned away my flesh. Droplets of tissue and muscle, melting from the all-consuming blood, flowed down my form and pooled at his feet. I leaned down and scooped up my liquefied flesh, pouring it down my throat and smothering it over my body. Sth'tcak scraped one of his nails across me, collecting the remains of the seething, blood-mingled skin that clung to me like burnt wax and then pierced his flesh-covered finger into my most holy depths.

The seed was planted.

My Master's Voice

I felt I was whole again, arrogant in the dark light of my Lord, until the one from the south arrived. He was cloaked in dark robes the first time he came to me, entering my abode while I sharpened a blessed weapon made from the remains of a deformed infant that I had given birth to a week earlier. The visitor swam in the air around me, potent with the Seed. I could feel the very fabric of the air crackle with his atmosphere, and I longed for the days when I once belonged to the House Melanis. Their presence was so subtle, yet complete. He spoke to me for much of the night, testing my resolve with each biting word until, finally, I broke before him.

"The Count has told me of the one called Isa. She does please me to see her now. What she thinks she has suppressed is only waiting for a sign. That sign has come in the form of I, and I am most interested with the possibilities."

"I have been cleansed," I replied. "I am pure once again." I showed him the dagger-like weapon and the limp, de-boned body of the infant at my feet.

"None of us are pure," he snapped. "The Count, he tells of power within you that is not of the Seed, yet the Sister Deaths lie far from here. How is this come to be? What further secrets await us? The Child has taught me much, perhaps you can teach me more. The Count hides power that resides within you. Let us see what happens when it is let out."

"No!" I screamed. "I will not return to the visions. The dreams, they visit me when they should not. They disease me. I am saved from them, the Count, he..."

"Has made you mine, Isa. Serve me well. We shall meet again. If you wish to save the life of Sth'tcak, speak not of my coming. Yes, many secrets to learn, many hearts to break."

He left without a sound, but I knew that I could not escape what was going to happen. The Melanis was going to change me, and, for once in my life, I had met with an Eternal Master that I feared.

City of Dread

Capal appeared different to me over the course of what the Melanis visitor called my "Awakening". The city no longer seemed pure to me but rather filthy and loathsome, like it didn't belong here. I began to wonder what it had been in the past, before our coming, before the arrival of the Eternal Masters and the closing of the Fold.

The Melanis delved deep into my soul, opening things up to me that I never knew existed. He was gentle at first, testing my boundaries and limitations. That did not last for long. He had a personal monastery, deep within the heart of the city, not far from the Koleris Fortress. He took me there, always when Sth'tcak was away on a vendetta kill or a rage hunt in the killing fields of the northern hills. My Koleris Lord knew nothing of my secret involvement with the shadowy Melanis, and I did not divulge my actions to him either. I knew full well that the Melanis would keep his promise and destroy Sth'tcak if he came to learn the truth of my affairs. I was still loyal, you see, and I could not turn my back so easily on several lifetimes of traditional upbringing.

I don't know exactly what the Melanis did to awaken me further to the River of Dream, but the results were unquestionable. My dreams became more real, more vivid with each probing. They were haunting nightmares that I could not control. I was helpless, something that I was not used to. With each new moon, and more frequently after signs of my progression were evident, he would come for me and snatch me away to his infernal den. My fear grew. I knew that upon the return to my hamlet, I alone would have to deal with the horrors of sleep that I knew were unavoidable.

The Melanis grew comfortable with my apparent loyalty and became lax with the bindings and wards that kept me under his control during the experiments. I was discovering elements of the dream that even he did not foresee. He was both insolent and assured that I was not a threat, although in the back of my mind, I wanted nothing more than to escape him and see him felled by the wrath of Sth'tcak. I wanted to be a Chosen, without the guilt of betraying my Lord.

Exiles

It was during a visit to the monument called the Cht'aux, where the Count and his favorite vassals rule over House Melanis, that I learned who my Melanis torturer really was.

I knew that my presence in the Count's court was a show of strength on Sth'tcak's part to all the other Iv'chet gathered. They knew that I was a gift from the Count himself, and my Lord never allowed an advantage to slip past his grasp, so I was always present at vital gatherings. While we traveled through Capal, after leaving the Cht'aux, the most unwelcome of experiences took place. I began to dream.

I was fully alert and of my senses when it happened. We were not far from the Cht'aux when I felt a jolt of energy pass through me, shocking my nerves with fire. The city around me began to fade from my vision, replaced with an unimaginable blend of colors and light that made little sense. Time seemed to stand still, a loud ringing in my ear deafening all other sound. I held my hands to the sides of my head and closed my eyes tight to seal them from the painful attack.

Then, I saw wings.

They were large fans, covered in a blood and attached to shoulders of metal. I screamed at the sight of it, running from what I saw with a panicked fear. I saw a glowing heart, bright and pure — truly pure — not like the false sense of it that I believed the Z'bri represented. I wanted to hold it, become it, but before I could understand what was taking place, I felt a piercing sensation through my chest.

I looked directly into Sth'tcak's eyes and saw them as the evil voids that they really were. His claw was stuck into my ribs, protruding slightly from the other side of my torso. He snapped his jaws at me, angered with my outcry. I bowed before him, quivering all over. I was cold, unnaturally so. I cried out for death, but knew that there would be no release. My lord would not kill me for my insolence, because then I would simply fall into the ranks of another Eternal Master, my knowledge and memories intact. He could not allow that to happen, to lose control of such an important vassal such as myself.

My master growled deeply, his voice muted somewhat by the chaos of the pride around him. I saw the bloodlust in their eyes, but they were not as wise as Sth'tcak. They would have seen me rendered there on the spot for the weakness that I showed, reveling in the final moments of my existence. They were not the beautiful forms that I admired, but vile monstrosities, barren of any sense of what it was to truly be alive. . . to have a soul.

Purification

I felt the energy again, but this time it was calmer, more controlled. I heard it whispering on the wind, releasing me from the hate that lay within me like a cancer. I could feel the seed unfolding and opening up into something greater, another part of itself that was locked away, denied from its true purpose. I came to understand many things in an instant, revelations that made my head swim and my spirit flow. I suddenly understood the taint that was all around me, and it made me sick. I began to bleed, blood flowing from between my legs, my eyes and my mouth. I was purging the corruption of my soul and allowing a new self to flourish.

Sth'tcak didn't see it that way.

He stepped away from me, retreating from the power that was all around. I heard the pride screaming for him to destroy me, and I saw that he was on the verge of giving in to them, falling to the rage that made him who he was. His claws flashed in the air, then stopped, inches from my flesh.

"She is more powerful than that," said a familiar voice. "Her life is the key to the power that you greed for."

Sth'tcak pulled back from the figure, realizing just whose presence he was in. "Eth'ian." There was hesitation in my lord's words. The pride went silent.

Verdict

"She must be spared. Her purpose is not yet complete."

"What are you speaking of, Melanis?"

"It is not your place to question!" Eth'ian's words were like a lightning, cracking the resolve of all those before him. "Take her to the cells, Sth'tcak, but do not harm her. She must live to see. She must be *awake* to show them to us."

"Riddles. Always riddles." Sth'tcak heaved his body back and forth, releasing his infinite anger in small trickles, but not enough to sate him. He struck one of the lesser of his pride and pulled him in close, tearing into the Koleris' neck with savage fury. The Koleris screeched and then began to shred itself apart, incapable of controlling its rage. Sth'tcak shouldered his way past the others and fell on top of me. I kept my eyes to the ground, too afraid to face what was to come. Sth'tcak shoved me up from the ground and clenched his fist around my torso. I withheld from vocalizing my pain, it being the least of my worries. I could not get the vision out of my head.

"Come, Koleris Warrior. I will show you where she will meet her fate." Eth'ian dismissed the pride before taking us into the depths of the city. I flopped in Sth'tcak's arms, listening to the exchange between two of the most malignant creatures that have ever walked the earth.

"I can give you what you want, Sth'tcak. You have only to obey my word. You know the Count has invited me here. Things will not always stay as they are. The H'I Kar is on the verge of destroying the pact that you revile so much. But that pact has kept your life here free from external concerns. You will either fall with the rest, or rise to take command of an army unlike any you have seen before."

"Lies. I do not fear the Baron's minions. They are weak and afraid. They live in shame, afraid of tin that walks and people that worship them."

"The Sister Deaths are not the enemy that threatens you. We need your loyalty before the others arrive. There is a power within this city that is not harnessed, nor reliant on the Seven Deaths, but exists of a primal essence. Understanding this will guarantee our victory, our ultimate goal."

"You make promises that you cannot keep, Eth'ian."

"Do not insult me. I do not bow to your power, and neither will they. They will come, Sth'tcak. Assuredly, they will come. Your death, or your rule? You decide. Already, I have taken steps to show you what can become of the humans. Soon, you will open your eyes. I will need a fierce leader. Show me, if that is what you are."

Eth'ian's plans slowly were becoming apparent, but I knew not the extent of them. What did he mean? Who was coming? Why was he warning Sth'tcak? I pondered these questions as I fell into unconsciousness and began to dream.

Snake among Demons — Tale of the Beasts

From the investigations of Met'chkay, Flemis Messenger

Why had he come? The Count had accepted the one from the South into the city, but there was a danger to the sanctity of Capal with his arrival. The Flemis realized this. I realized this. Why had he come here? The Messenger was released from the hive, and I was Met'chkay. I was the hive. I was the messenger. The city needed us. The city was alive, and it needed me, the hive, the messenger, to discover his true purpose, the one from the south who was not one of us.

There was a disturbance. It hurt us with its presence. It was hidden, masked by secrets, Melanis secrets. He was a deceiver. He was Eth'ian and we needed to know his purpose. I walked along the street called Gluttony, watching the obese masses melding into one another, feeding off of each other, defecating, feeding, watching. I formed within them. We formed as one. Thoughts that were not my own became a part of me.

"No, we did not see him. I did. He passed this way. He was fluid, masterful. We felt him. He was heard to be speaking to another. I don't know whom. We don't know whom. She was with him. She seemed afraid. He was taking her. She feared him. He scolded her. Touched her with his power. Eat her, please, we called. I wanted to taste her flesh. I wanted to be her flesh. The Awakened one he called her. No. Awaken, he told her. She is not like us. She was bred to fight. I did not see her. Her arms were like swords. She questioned him. 'My lord, he is another,' she said. He is not yours. He is her lord, but not he, whom we did not see. I saw him. She would taste so good. She sweats. Her face was smooth. He took her. Where? Away, I did not hear. We did not hear. They spoke no more. Her lord was in danger, from him. Eat her, please, so that we may have her flesh."

Viper's Touch

A Serf, why? Where was the sense in it? The obese bodies told me no more, given in to their ramblings. They were Flemis serfs themselves, but not like the one from my hive. We were different in many ways, but we were all Flemis. She was strong with arms of blades. The Koleris! She was a part of them. A Koleris Serf lost in the folds of the Melanis from the south. What news did this bring? The Prince must be spoken to. His grace would allow to me dig even deeper.

From the mighty Fortress of the Koleris, he watched over the Valley of Spears, intent, wrathful. I approached, carefully. I felt his aura. I bowed low. We did not move. He was the Prince. We were not of his stature. He was separate, supreme. He could do with me as he wished. We wished to remain. "Flemis, give me the life of fifty of your serfs and the Prince will attend to you," said Kail'ak, a Sangis observer on behalf of Thak'ikch'at.

"We will. They will be presented for your pleasure."

"Then come forth," he continued. The Prince turned and looked upon me. I was small in his presence. I was alone, away from the hive. I was Met'chkay.

"There is a Lord amongst you. He has a Serf, a Chosen. I must find her. It is by the order."

"Whose order?" All of Thak'ikch'at's words were spoken by the Sangis. If the Prince were to speak to me himself, his first breath would tear me asunder like so many teeth.

"There is a concern amongst the Flemis Hives. There is a danger within the city. It is brought here from another. The threat is planted from within, from the House of Deceivers."

"The Prince takes insult to your words of danger. He wishes an additional two hundred of your vassals as recompense." We nodded in compliance. "The Deceiver must be uncovered. Thak'ikch'at will reward you by sparing your life should you succeed. Find the poisonous one and return him to us so that the Prince of Capal can place his heart with the others on the walls of the Fortress." The Sangis fell back into the shadows. I spoke to the hive. The payment was made.



The Struggle Within

Far off, in the stained hills that surrounded the city, our investigation continued. I made to leave the walled restrictions of Capal. We passed by the Sangis Temple of Flesh. We, the Flemis, seldom desired to go there, except when there was more than ample reason to do so. The intrigues of Capal were great, one lord vying against another, always leaving things on the brink of chaos. The Sangis were always involved. The House of Perversion did not hold the same authority as their siblings did in the southern H'I Kar. Count Nemerath and Prince Thak'ikch'at made sure the Sangis played secondary roles. Their Houses were the richest in serfs and also held the greatest powers of the Seed. We were the Seed. The Sangis only clawed at the heels of the loftier Houses, picking at the scraps that fell. They used these to the best of their abilities, always churning up twisted versions of old concerns. The Sangis did this well. The Temple of Flesh was the source of many of the plots that surfaced. No matter what these dark affairs brought however, they were nothing compared to what the Flemis now feared from the Melanis called Eth'ian. The Seed had warned us of his coming. We were warned of his coming.

We, the Flemis, did not care for the cracks between our kind. The affairs of the lesser lords were simply games for the weak. Those with any power were above the minor conflicts that arose daily. The High Lords' plans were far beyond what could be seen. The Count and the Prince manipulated events to work in their favor. Different ways. Different reasons.

Games

I took one last glance at the Sangis temple and made for the northern gates. Before I was out of sight of the Sangis temple however, I felt another approaching, his emotions reaching out to me. I stopped. Without turning, I shifted my sight behind me, gazing at the perverted form that came near.

"Met'chkray, I must speak to you."

"We do not have the time to waste here."

"I know what you seek. She was mine once. The Chosen."

I moved towards the Sangis, a Page, a lowly creature, undeserving of my attention had he not spoken so. "How do you know of what I seek?"

"I was not always a Page. I was once the Prince's Duke, but she was taken from me as punishment when I lost my title. I need to warn you."

I saw the massive marks upon the Sangis' form. They were permanent scars that signified he was but one step away from becoming chained. He must have acted gravely against his Prince, although I could guess that his presence was meant as an example to the others. He continued to snort and drivel in front of me as I loomed over him.

"What can *you* warn us of that will be of any worth? If you do not cease, we assure you that your Prince will not be so kind to you the next time."

"No. Do not threaten me. I do not wish to harm you. I have already been stripped of so much. I can not endure the Chaining. It is horrible. I need the Seed. Heed my counsel, Met'chkray."

I felt the Hive mind flow through me, urging me to make haste to the northern hamlets of the Koleris. We were not pleased. "Quickly then. Before we seal your doom."

"She is stronger than you think. She is not like the others. She is a Chosen, yes, but also far more. She can resist you. She will weaken your mind and infect your heart, like she did to me. Beware her, Met'chkray, or you will end up worse than I."

This Sangis had seen his day. I spoke to the hive and entered into the collective. ◀



One Among Many

I stepped away from the writhing wall within the Temple of Flesh, all the while watching the Sangis in front of me on the street, making sure he did not flee. I slithered down a hall that stank of lust. It was everywhere and I loathed having to be there. We weren't planning on staying long. The passage opened up into the moist throne room of the Sangis Prince, the Unnamed One. His massive form was engaged in an orgy that consisted of several of his choicest vassals as well as a throng of serfs that were in different stages of fatal ecstasy. I flowed over all of them, floating on their secretions, all the while the Sangis Page pleading with me on the street outside.

I washed over the orgy and engulfed the side of one of the Prince's many engorged organs. He flicked open an eye, staring at me while continuing his pleasures elsewhere.

"I am the Hive Met'chkay and there is a page that hinders our investigations." I snatched the page into my arms, forcing him to tell me his name. I repeated it to the Prince inside the temple. "We service you for the right to chain him to our host, so that he may no longer carry on in his dissidence."

The Sangis Prince spoke one word to me and I shuddered with foreign sensations at his tone, but I had accomplished the task. We had done well. Already, Melanis Chainers, loyal to Met'chkay, were en route to capture the page. The subsequent ritual would make him mine.

I passed under the northern wall, Koleris serfs wandering its length and breadth, overseen by an Iv'chet that struck at them unceremoniously. The Iv'chet roared down at me, the air tearing open with the heat of his words. I released a Sangis serf I had picked up from within my fleshy folds and dropped her onto the ground near the bleeding tower. I proceeded out of Capal and into the lands of the Koleris Killing Fields, my payment made. I heard the screams of the serf who paid my toll as I swam over the charred earth.

Deaths Voices

On the way to a hamlet that held some promise, the most unexpected of surprises was met. We were most pleased. There was a group of humans, stragglers from the west that had landed right in my lap. They were carrying a dead one who was wrapped in a white cowl. The others had strange markings over their faces. They tried to repel me, although I'm not certain I knew what they were doing to hold me in place. Their gestures were strange, and they spoke words that were not the same language that the serfs spoke. Their bodies aided me in the difficulty of traversing the killing fields. "Valerie, we have failed you." I could still hear one of them screaming inside of me, pleading to be let go. "The fires still burn. She needs you now. They hate Her for what She has done. Valerie, come back to us. I'm so sorry." I shifted my weight abruptly and the screaming stopped. I made sure to keep one of them alive though. The hive would be pleased with my find.

The Koleris hamlets were not like the Flemis ones. All of our serf villages were below ground, either under the city itself or along its outskirts. The wrathful ones could not stand being so confined, requiring vast areas in which to carry out their wars. I was upset that the first hamlet I reached was all but wiped out, the corpses of the inhabitants lying strewn amongst the rubble. There were some Chained monstrosities also littered among the dead, and I checked their brands to see which Iv'chet they belonged to. The dead can reveal much in the way of information.

I followed the trail of the attackers who had left such carnage. It was a directed attack, not some random rampage, so I needed to find the lord who was skilled at such tactics. He would be able to tell me where the Chosen was and specifically which Iv'chet had her as a part of his vassals. I located the pack leader a few weeks later, many horizons west of the city.

I presented him with a gift in the form of one of the strangely marked humans. He flayed the skin of the victim and placed it on his body, the fire within him fusing the new flesh to his own. He then answered my questions between his bouts of pure rage. It was difficult to listen to him, his fury overwhelming him at odd intervals, but he did manage to give me some of the information that I required.

Taste of Rage

"There was a stranger, a deceiver, at the hamlet of Sth'tcak. Sth'tcak is never there when he arrives." Steaming blood was flowing from the pores of the beast. The hive warned me to leave him soon. "Sth'tcak has a Chosen one. She is a gift to him from the great Count of Cht'aux. Sth'tcak is not here now. He is in Capal." His breath was reeking of death. "She is not here either. The hamlet remains untended. We will take it from him if he does not return soon. He has the Count's favor. The Count has called him to the Cht'aux. Why does he deserve this? I am far superior to him. I have killed the Pride leader Jk'thaf. I am the Pride leader now. I have more rage than he, more rage." The hive was screaming in my head to return to them and it was almost too late. I severed myself from the mass in front of the Koleris as he ripped into me, throwing huge chunks of flesh into the air and reveling in the death of my form. It did not matter. We were Met'chkay. I was the hive. We were safe. . . and we had learned much.

We descended into the hive as a swarm. We spoke to the serfs. We told them to watch for the Chosen one that belonged to Sth'tcak. But, someone resisted! I tried to call them back into the collective. They were straying from the path. There were others as well. No. We had neglected our defenses at the walls. Strange marked humans, like the ones we killed weeks before. They were here, in my hive, inside of me. The Seed retreated from my grasp and they escaped. I needed to warn the Count. We were being infected with the disease of the south. The diseased ones had come.

"You will never warn the Count of their arrival, Met'chkay."

"Eth'ian! We must stop you. We are Met'chkay and you. . . disease us. . . why?"

The Melanis form wrapped itself all over, encompassing the entire cavern in a dark cloak of night. We felt weakened, severed. . . individual.

"Your investigation has brought you too close to the truth. I can not allow the Count to learn of my plans. The heart will be mine. It is the key to all of this. The key out of this prison."

His Sundering power was immense. I needed to escape but he had trapped me from doing so. I could not leave. There was nowhere else to run. I was Met'chkay. We were the hive and he was suffocating us. He was chaining us! How could he do this? I could not resist. The one who escaped, he was my only chance at surviving. I can feel him still. He almost gave in. I would be weak in him. I needed to warn the Count. The tearing within was excruciating, binding Met'chkay into the cavern itself. The entire cavern was becoming me — or was I becoming it? I could not resist him. We could not fight back. Our mind was breaking, the many in one becoming the one in many, but I reached out for the one that escaped. I felt his body, and then I felt his soul. It burned me.

Union

I was staring into the eyes of a marked human. "This will make you feel better," she said. I fell into a dark place, fighting to resurface. "We must stay strong. Have trust in our cell. Have faith in the Prophecy."

"I do, Karennia," I replied. "We will always believe."

Escape from Purgatory — Tale of the Beginning

From the journals of Damien Farshadow, Jacker of the Eighth Tribe

"They won't let us leave. Not without a toll." The others looked at me in confusion. "They won't let us just walk out of here."

"He's right," replied Chantalle. "Isa says that they don't *want* us to leave. Our pain is their pleasure. We are trapped here, unless we fight our way out."

"We're in no condition for that," said Gerard. "Even if we get past the city walls, there are Stalkers in the valley. They herded us here before. There is too much danger."

"The journey itself is hard enough. Assuming we live that long," added Terrance.

"Why have they not come for us? It's so quiet here. I feel like we are being toyed with."

"Enough!" Kareenna was fed up with the Tribal sniveling. "We are *not* going to die here. We have found whom we came for. Isa has showed us that it is possible for others to dream, those who have never known the Fatimas. Where this power comes from, even I cannot explain. But, maybe the Guides can. We need to get her back to Hom."

"Who says she is in your care?" said Terrance, turning to us. "We have quested for her as well, and she will return to the Grand Council where she will be assessed. Chantalle has done her duty to Magdalen. It is time for *us* to go home."

Shatter the Peace

Fredrique and Tatiana jumped up from their positions, weapons drawn. "I knew it!" Tatiana screamed. "You never wanted to set her free, you only wanted her for your own ends. You Tribals will never change!"

"Don't hide behind your false Prophecy, beggar. There is nothing nobler in your interest in her than there is in our own. She will return with us, by the will of the Fatimas and the Grand Council of the Nation."

"You will not walk out of this Cathedral alive, Tribal. I'll see to that personally."

"We gave them our word, Terrance. They helped us. We would not have lived so long without their aid. We need to escape Capal, first and foremost," Travis argued.

"You have no authority over this Circle, Lorekeeper. You never have. The Dreamer is ordered to return to Vimary, under our protection . . ."

"You have no means with which to protect her!" Fredrique shouted. "Especially after we get through with you." He bolted towards Terrance, his dagger inches from the Magdalite's neck.

We watched it all transpire and, instinctively, I knew what was happening. The Z'bri taint was affecting us. Not even the walls of the Cathedral could protect us from it for much longer. We needed to get out of the city, and soon. I was getting visions of memories that I had never lived, secrets of Capal that we did not discover ourselves. I heard voices in my head — our head — telling me to guide the others past the walls and out into the tainted wilderness that would lead us home. We knew the path out of the city.

"There is a way out, but it is a difficult road. It holds the promise of seeing us through this. Don't ask me how we know, I just do. We have to stick together, or we might as well surrender our souls this very instant." There was something within me that had changed when we past through the cavern of serfs and, for better or for worse, it was going to save us. I was met with approval and so we set down to accomplishing the task of escaping the city that I felt I had known all of my life.

Culling the Herd

We were on the northwestern section of the wall. There were Koleris serfs above us, wielding wicked, rune-encrusted weapons made of bone. Isa called up to them and spoke some words that sent them away from our position. For how long, we had no way of knowing, but it bought us enough time to slip past the walls and into the forest nearby. Isa's status was quite evident from the way the serfs heeded her command. We were glad to have met up with her. We moved quickly under the dark, watchful walls, soon fleeing through the gnarled undergrowth just outside the city. The snapping of the twigs and the sickly bushes all around were the only things that echoed in the silent woods, until we heard them coming.

Isa was yelling something at me as we ran and I looked back to see that Chantalle had fallen in the crumpled path. It was inhumane to make her run like this after what she had endured, but we had no other choice. I stopped and turned back, yelling for the others to keep running. I lifted one shoulder and helped her to her feet, and saw that her ankles were heavily swollen, her joints enflamed and weak. She was coughing uncontrollably, a dark red mucous staining her mouth. Travis, the Sheban who was apparently more loyal to us than to his Magdalite companions, aided me in my task. Together, we supported Chantalle's weight and continued after the others.

Then, they fell upon us. I saw Hawthorn lift his staff over his head in a useless defense, the twig snapping in two. The clawed hand carried though its arc and shattered the Shaman's skull, fragments of it spinning through the air. One of the pieces struck me square in the arm. I flinched in pain, but noticed that the wound did not open, but rather expunged the shrapnel and quickly healed over. I looked on as the laceration closed by itself, not a trace to be seen except for the torn fabric that now loosely covered it. Travis did not notice and I turned my attention back to Chantalle. I motioned for him to help me carry her toward the slope that dropped into a rugged ravine lined with stones slick from the river's mist. We dove for the crevasse, the screams and sounds of battle carrying clearly on the wind.

With my last glance back, I saw Karennia and Isa tumbling down a cliff-face before falling several stories into a pool of murky water. The ground jumped up to meet us, the world spinning over and over as we carried on down the ravine's slope. I slid to a halt, my clothing tattered and my armor cracked from the violent descent. Chantalle lay beside me, unconscious from her wounds and the exertion placed on her fragile body. Travis was rubbing his left leg, having struck a protruding rock on the way down. He was bleeding profusely, but seemed stalwart enough to carry on.

Before I lifted Chantalle's body off of the ground, I gazed sorrowfully back up the rise. I saw the Koleris pack tearing into what remained of the Tribal Circle. Fredrique and Tatiana were fighting bravely, screaming for me to escape. I hesitated for but a moment, but I knew I needed to get back to Hom. Their sacrifice would not be forgotten. I turned away just as a spiked tail impaled the Dahlian, lifting him into the air, his spine shattered and exposed.

"Travis. We have to keep going." I shouted. He looked towards me and nodded despite his fatigue.

He scampered over to where I was, covering his head with his arms. His eyes were wide, his face pale with fright. A shock of white hair ran through his dark locks. We turned for the stream nearby and entered its frigid waters. We did not stop until our bodies finally gave in, collapsing in the hills far west of Capal.

It was farther from the city than we had ever been before.

From the Legends of Chantalle, Diplomat of Magdalen

We survived by some miracle, living through what seemed impossible. Damien called it destiny, his belief in it stronger than ever. He had changed from his struggled journey to Capal, but then again, we all had. Travis was finding a new part of himself that would continue to grow as time passed. He began speaking of his duty to the people of the Nation, beyond what the Council ordered for him to carry out. He felt he was on a personal duty to Tera Sheba, his own destiny to be found in the Outlands of Vimary.

The two questors told me their stories of how they came to find me. They were heartfelt tales that you are now familiar with. They were brave and bold, the both of them, because they did what they believed in. They carried out what their souls' desire told them to do.

"I'm not going back. I know I was young and foolish once, but I have grown. I am a Lorekeeper of Tera Sheba and my destiny lies out here. Vimary looks beautiful from this distance, masking the troubles that plague it, but there is more to be done. There will be others. Capal awaits us, yearning to be let go. I know that now. I will be here, waiting, to guide them. I will miss my friends and family back home, but perhaps one day they will come to understand why I chose to remain.

"The dawn is approaching. I wonder what the new day will hold."

We parted with Travis, wishing him the Goddess' blessing on his quest. It was a courageous step for him, but it was one that needed to be taken. He was right, though. There will be others and they will need the wisdom of one who holds the secret lore of the Northern Wind.

Blessed are those who would chance upon him in their travels.

Damien and I parted ways on the shores opposite Hom. He knew that my path lay elsewhere as well. That I could never truly fit amongst the Tribes or the Fallen ever again. He told me that he had not given up on Karennia and Isa. He would form a cell to avenge his fallen comrades and search for those who were missing. He had hope, and I knew with that as his sword, the future of the people would be guaranteed. He promised me that if he were to find Isa, he would protect her from the Fatimas so that she could find the Goddess of her own free will. He laughed sadly and said that Karennia was watching out for the both of them in the Outlands and that, when they were all reunited, a true unity would take place.

Damien was tied to the city of Capal tighter than he imagined. I could see it in his eyes, and we both knew that one day he would return. It was not only his destiny, but the destiny of his Tribe as well.

So that is how I found my way back to Vimary, back here to Xstasis. I needed to warn you, my love, of the evil that still exists, because I know you will take me at my word. You can only know the truth in my soul, Veronique. Take the tale I have woven and warn the others. Let them know. Tell them.

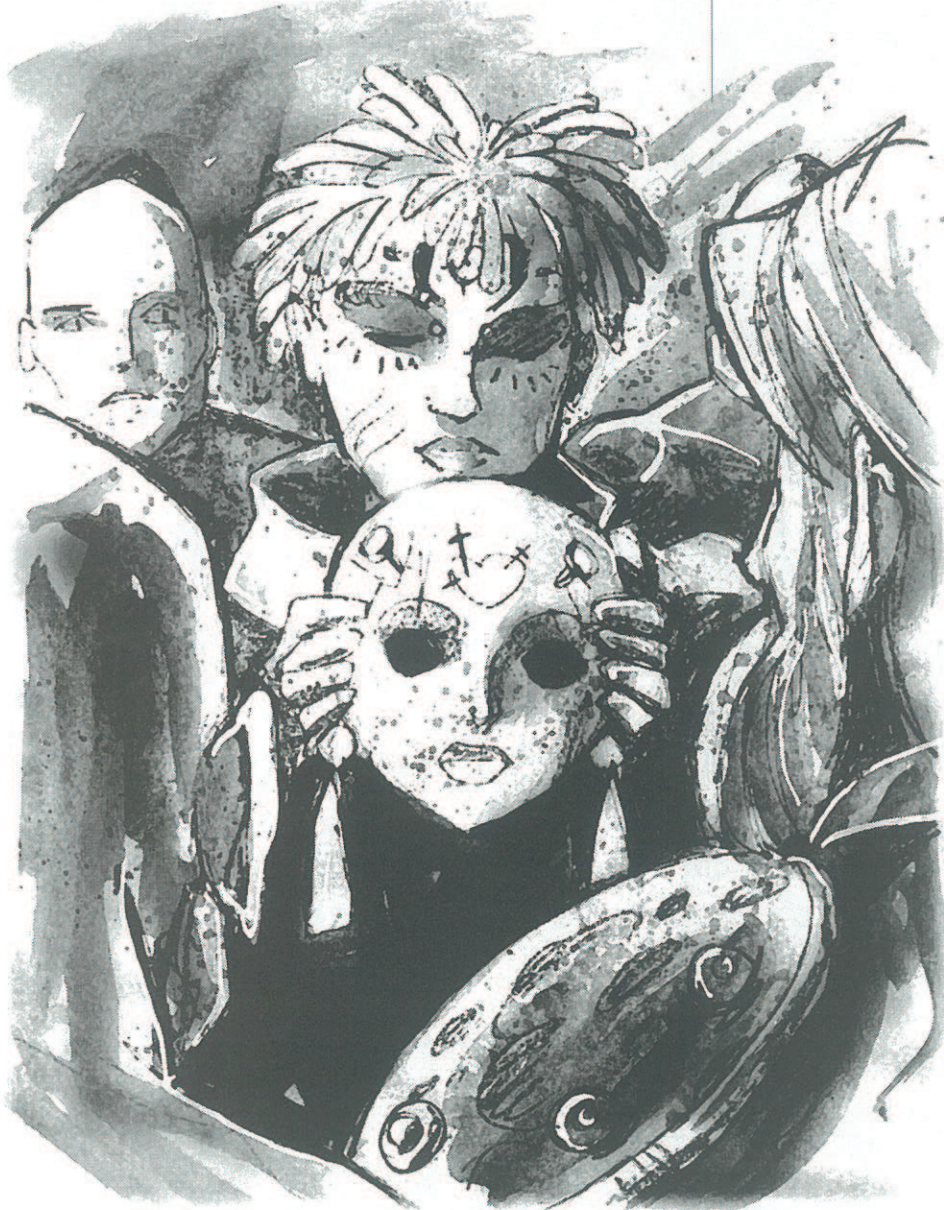
I love you. Always.

The Mask Unveiled

From the Legends of Veronique, Poet

"Those were the last words that she ever said to me. I wept, tears streaming down my face with the knowledge that I would never again see my true love. She wished not to be found, only to live what little life she had left and perish in the grace of the Fatima that she served so well. I granted her this wish and I will carry on her life's story so that you may learn where your own destiny lies."

I removed the mask from my face, looking at the people before me, each and every one of them with the promise of achieving a life of magic and truth. I was not like them, but I knew that they were our future. I had been given the gift to act on behalf of true love. Their faces looked back at me, their eyes filled with hope. I knew then that all those who had died bringing us this wisdom did not do so in vain, for here, before me, were the Children of Prophecy.



Chapter 2: Weaver Resources

I watch the horizon
For the people of the Fall
They are the ones that I await
Come to me
For I am free
- Isa, Serf Dreamer



THE WORLD OF THE NORTH

Word from the North is a story about overcoming obstacles and facing the destiny of the Eighth tribe. It foreshadows events and hints at many agendas and secrets that are taking place in the **Tribe 8** setting, giving Weavers and Players alike a sense that there are greater things on the horizon. **Into the Outlands** allowed Weavers to confidently venture outside of the confines of Vimary, and that sense of exploration carries on in **Word from the North**, leading inevitably to Capal.

The Fatimas have largely ignored the outlying areas surrounding Vimary, and, with Joshua's death, the liberation of humanity was cut short, allowing the Z'bri to carry on in their wicked ways with little in the way of opposition. Only in the H'I Kar does the waning Pact of the Dome protect the inhabitants of Vimary, but elsewhere the masses continue to live a violent existence overshadowed by the constant and looming Z'bri Houses. There are a countless number of souls who have never known what freedom truly is, and with the coming of the Eighth Tribe, hope is finally being instilled in many.

The Eighth Tribe knows it is the exiles' duty to free humanity from the clenching grip of its enemies. While there are many debates as to who (or what) actually makes up the "enemies" of the people, the majority agree that the Z'bri are the most obvious. The Z'bri in Capal, the City of Hate, have no regard for the human condition whatsoever, using serfs as a commodity that indicate rank and status and nothing more. It is all about control over the world of the flesh and humans have been reduced to a race of slaves.

There is an ever-growing movement in Capal however, and serfs are looking for signs of redemption. Capal, the second city of Joshua's Prophecy, is a milestone in the Destiny of the Fallen that holds many clues and mysteries that are waiting to be uncovered.

WHERE IS CAPAL?

Capal lies northeast of Vimary, approximately one hundred and eighty kliks down river. It is half that from the "Living Bridge" mentioned in **Into the Outlands** (*Outlands*, p. 69). The journey there is a dangerous one, although water travel is easily the quickest and most direct route. Mountainous regions, littered with lakes and waterways, cover the areas north and south of the river making ground travel very difficult and extremely hazardous. The geography and precise lay of the land have been left intentionally vague, as it is a region tainted with Z'bri Atmosphere. The landscape, much like that of the H'I Kar, takes on a personality of its own and Weavers should feel free to describe it as twisted and nightmarish as possible, modifying it to the perceptions (and fears) of the PCs.

MOOD

There are limitless stories that can be told in the Tribe 8 setting, Capal being one that delves into horror. It offers a look at the darker side of the world, providing Weavers a chance to introduce an environment that has yet to be tamed. The laws of reality don't function in Capal as they do elsewhere, which opens a whole new realm of story possibilities. Before introducing Capal into a cycle, however, it is important to understand what it represents and the desired atmosphere that the city creates.

There is a pervading sense of despair in Capal that cannot be ignored. It sticks to everything like a polluting film, seeping into its finest recesses. Even the Z'bri of Capal are wearied with the monotony of their meaningless existence, the intrigues of the court becoming more like minor annoyances than victories to be gloated over. This disparity is affecting the lowest of vassals to the highest ranks in the Capalian nobles, each one realizing, to some degree, that there must be something more than the prison of flesh that surrounds them. The serfs are the most obvious representations of this despair, without an inkling of hope remaining in the majority of the souls that are enslaved there. This "bottoming out" of emotions, as it were, has created a vacuum for the Z'bri who feed off of such things, allowing for some to reach beyond its suffocating confines and in turn search for something new. There are serfs who have reached farther than any others have been able to, understanding layers of the spirit that previously have been denied and even delving into the River of Dream itself.

Anger and wrath are also part of the underlying force that drives Capal. The uncontrolled rage that emanates from the city, so raw in its form, is enough to drive the unprepared insane. This unrestrained anger is leading to a breakdown of the power structure in Capal resulting in a chaotic disorganization of the Houses, which are in turn falling into frustrated states of animosity.

It is important for the Weaver to keep these concepts in mind when portraying Capal, as they are the emotional substances that support the entire city.

INTRODUCING CAPAL

Offering a new horizon for a Weaver's cycle, Capal can be brought into an existing story using several methods, all of which can be used on their own or individually. **Tribe 8** is rife with myths and tales of heroism, tragedy, exploration, spirituality and destiny. **Word from the North** continues these themes, opening up the next stage of events in the arcing storyline. Weavers can now take their stories past previous thresholds and into undiscovered territories. Here are a few ideas on how to seed Capal into a cycle:

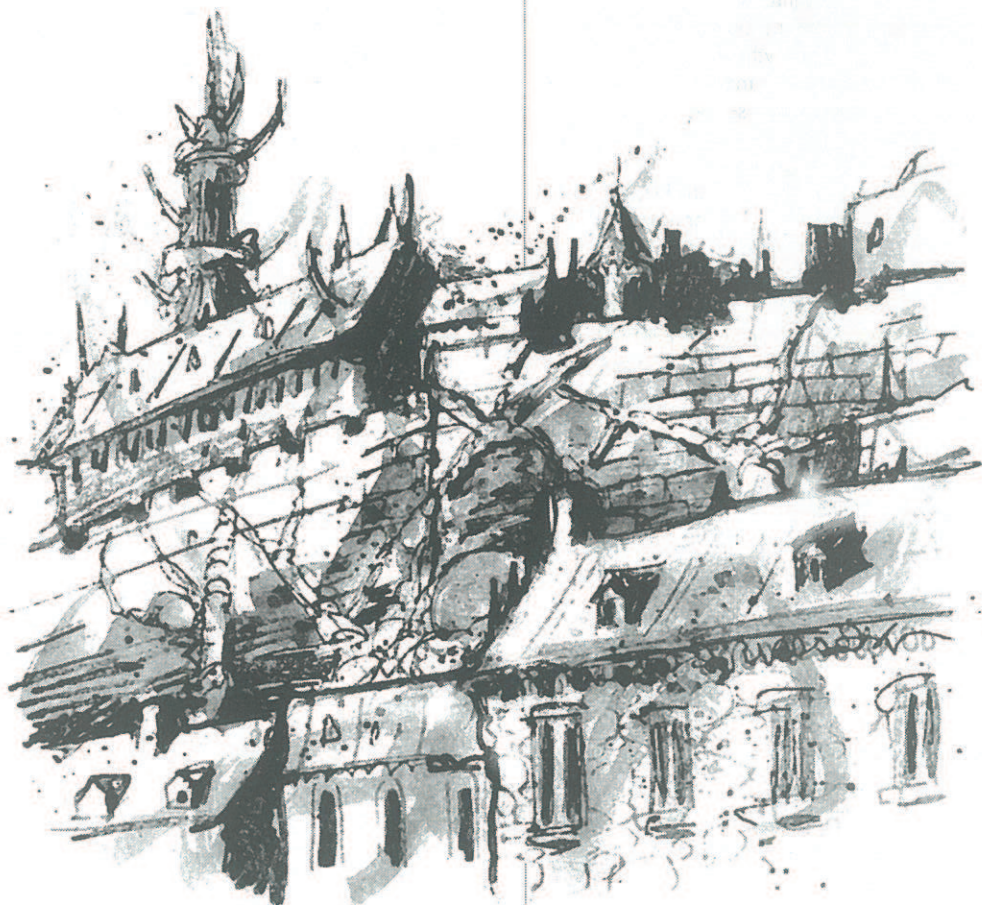
Dreams: Plaguing (or blessing, depending on the perspective) the PCs with visions of Capal can invite Players to venture to the north. Foreshadowing future elements of the story with dreams and visions of a dark city that resides past the known lands can get characters who believe in Joshua's Prophecy to undertake all sorts of perilous quests. The fabled second city still remains a mystery to the Doomsayers and visionaries of the Fallen. Increasing the strength and purpose of dreams dealing with Capal, along with signs and omens that tell of the future of the Eighth Tribe, makes for entertaining and interesting plot hooks.

Legends: The stories of the Tribal Nation and the Fallen on Hom make up the oral history of **Tribe 8**. Having the players hear of the accomplishments that others have made, as well as portraying myth and legend, can plant seeds and ideas for the PCs to explore. **Word from the North** relays the quests of but a few groups that have traveled to Capal and returned to tell

about it, although it need not be limited to the characters mentioned herein. Having friends and comrades return from the north and speak of similar exploits is a surefire way to generate interest in the Players to do the same.

Adventure: Oftentimes, it takes little in the way of prodding and luring to get courageous characters to quest the Outlands. During explorations, the PCs can start to hear rumors of the wastes to the north and the secrets that are hidden there. While simply stumbling upon Capal is unlikely, having an adventure or quest lead in that direction can facilitate the introduction of the city into a cycle. Where the story evolves from there is only limited by the imagination of the Weaver and the players involved.

Destiny: **Tribe 8**, at its core, is about Destiny. Capal plays an important role in the progression of the evolving story-arc and hence can only be ignored for so long. Early seeding of Capal in a cycle makes the implementation of future plots and cycle supplements that much easier. Using the Destiny of the Eighth Tribe as the catalyst for this is the most obvious answer. The Children of Prophecy have proven that they are indeed the ones Joshua spoke of — at least to themselves — and many have a new sense of purpose because of this (see **Trial by Fire**). Weavers should not shy away from using this powerful tool to highlight the importance of Capal and what it means to the Eighth Tribe. With more word coming from the north each season, the Children of Prophecy understand that destiny awaits them.



STORY IDEAS

While Capal is a Z'bri controlled domain, the stories that can be told there still have the possibility of carrying over several ranges, from the heroic to the gritty. The adventures that take place in or near Capal will likely have large doses of horror, it being the nefarious place it is. Quest ideas are mentioned below to assist Weavers in moving their cycles beyond Vimary.

Lost Friends: Having the PCs learn that close friends or family are missing to the north can spur them on to a rescue mission. The nature of these sorts of tales provides limitless plot ideas, as both the Outlands and Capal will need to be overcome in order to accomplish their goal. Then there is the question of whether the rescued companions are still the same people they once knew and loved, having succumbed to the taint of the Z'bri.

Blackmail: The PCs, thinking they are involved in a quest for their own reasons, discover that others are actually using them for other agendas. By time the PCs discover the truth, they are too deeply involved to simply back out. While carrying out their personal duty, they actually accomplish something adverse to their own goals. This dilemma can lead to many intriguing possibilities no matter which factions it involves.

The Artifact: There is always room for the lure of a lost artifact or a piece of forgotten lore to be uncovered. Whether they are Fatimal remains, weapons of untold powers or clues about the Nomads, Hunters or other such secretive groups, the quest can lead to Capal. Joshuan Artifacts and Hunter weapons are an obvious possibility; however, the Weaver should not feel limited to these alone. There are many real life myths and legends that can be adapted for a **Tribe 8** story (such as the *Sangreal Quest*, **T8 Companion**, pp. 66-81) and adapting these tales can be both enjoyable and exciting for Players of all types.

A Favor: Having a mentor or respected elder ask the PCs to carry out a favor on her behalf is a useful option for novice or young Players. Simply laying out a list of things that the PCs need to accomplish for their mentor, such as: recovering a stolen artifact, investigating the Covenant, searching for clues to the Prophecy, bringing back a map of the forbidden northern lands, etc... gives the Weaver a lot of control when it comes to plotting the storyline. Despite the obviously heavy-handed approach of this style, it can be handled subtly as well. For PCs that have followed or played through the Children of Prophecy story arc, there are many Fallen luminaries that may support a quest that takes the Players to the north.

The Goddess' Call: For PCs involved heavily with the River of Dream, having visions of Capal as the Second City enter their dreams can place added importance on traveling to the north. The spirits or awakening serfs in Capal may be contacting the dreamer with calls that beckon for her to free them. The Weaver, by using the River of Dream, can open the possibilities of having the PCs explore Capal spiritually rather than physically. While there is relative safety in doing so, the dangers that reside in the River of Dream are often far greater to a person's soul than one may first assume.

Z. Weaver Resources

Trapped: During travels in the Outlands, hostile Squat bands may prevent the PCs from returning to the safe shores of Vimary. The only option is to head north but, soon enough, the group discovers why the Tribes have edicts banning travel there. The PCs must make a decision: either risk the merciless Squats, or take their chances in Capal.

THE Z'BRI HOUSES

The Z'bri rule over Capal with an iron fist, but that doesn't mean that it is an impenetrable wall. The beasts have their own troubles to deal with and conflict between the Houses is unavoidable. With so many personal agendas - and the constant vying for rank and status - taking place, the city is being cracked from within. Despite its internal problems, however, it stands as a challenge that threatens to rob humanity of its rightful place.



THE KOLERIS

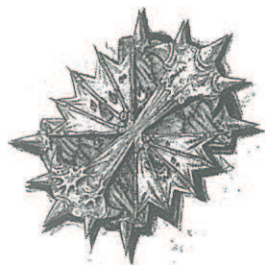
The ruling House of the city, led by Prince Thak'ikch'at, the Koleris have been feeling the pressures brought on by the treaty with the H'I Kar. The Capalian Koleris feel that the Z'bri in the H'I Kar are feeble and undeserving of the Seed's power due to the presence of the Tribals in their midst. There have been numerous attempts to subversively empower the H'I Kar Koleris to overthrow the Baron but they have never come to pass. The Capalian lords under the Prince's reign see this as a sign of complacency within the House, which has forced Thak'ikch'at to tighten his grip to an almost suffocating level. Nothing happens in Capal without the knowledge of the Koleris Prince.

Most recently, rumors of a renegade Koleris named Count Lothar have caught the Prince's interest, and he seeks whatever knowledge he can on this subject. If he manages to learn the truth of what is happening, a foothold could finally be placed in the H'I Kar and both the Tribes and the Sangis Baron could finally be cleansed from the earth.

THE MELANIS

Always in the shadows, the Melanis of Capal have their influence over all of the other Houses. Overseen by Count Nemerath, considered to be one of the most ancient Z'bri in existence, House Melanis attends to the many power plays that take place between lords. Gatherers of secrets and lost information, the Melanis play a dangerous game of balancing rule in their favor. Of course, with Nemerath pulling the strings, they seldom fail. This House is the true power behind Capal, but they are more than happy to keep the Koleris in their authoritative seat. There is an evil secret however, hidden within the Cht'aux, that Nemerath does not want revealed. It reinforces his position over all others, including Thak'ikch'at and he defends it against any and all prying eyes.

Eth'ian of Melanis, recently escaped from the H'I Kar, has found some grace within the walls of Capal and is shaking the status quo with his arrival. His true purpose for being in the city has yet to come to light, but he works vigilantly to see his plans through. Only time will tell exactly what the outcome of Eth'ian's betrayals will be, but, no matter what, it will prove to once again unsettle the foundations of all involved.



THE FLEMIS

Of all the Houses in Capal, the Flemis are the ones who fight to maintain some semblance of stability; they are the glue that binds the city together and, in fact, much of Capal is made of Flemis hives. The streets are literally alive with their power. If it were not for the Flemis, the Houses would have fallen on each other in destructive fits of rage and treachery, leaving nothing but shattered remains. There are several hives in Capal, but none of them hold any more influence over another. To the Flemis of Capal, all hives are one.

The other Houses all realize the necessity of the Flemis, as well as the void that they fill, which gives the House a lot of freedom. They watch and listen to everything but, unlike the Melanis, they only get involved when something threatens the stability of the city. This being the case, the Flemis have a lot of work ahead of them.

THE SANGIS

Reduced to serving the other Houses in varying capacities, the Sangis in Capal are pitiful compared to the power their House wields in the H'I Kar. They seldom play any vital roles, officially, but that doesn't keep the Sangis Prince and his minions from carrying on with their decadent, perverse ways. The Sangis act as emissaries, messengers, stewards, administrators, observers and countless other secondary roles in Capal. They were not always looked down upon in such a manner but, with the death of Tibor and the accession of the Baron several generations past, the Koleris (assisted by the Melanis) made certain that the same thing could not happen in Capal. This house has never been given the chance to rise from its present condition and is barred from having any formal correspondences with the H'I Kar. The Sangis Prince in Capal, known only as "The Unnamed One," strives to change his House's status by constantly hatching new plots and schemes to drive the other Houses at each others throats.

They play a game of compromises, all the while biding their time to snatch at any chance of claiming Capal as their own. They are secretly trying to support the Baron in the H'I Kar but this may be more of a mistake than anything else, as they are currently unaware of his waning control there.





LAYERS OF HELL

The city itself covers both the north and south sides of the river, although the core exists strictly on the north bank. There are two major portions of the city: the outer wall and the inner wall. The outer wall is where the lesser lords watch over their personal hamlets, administering them in whatever manner they deem appropriate. There are domains representing each of the Houses in the outer walls, the Koleris hamlets being the most frequent. There is subsequently less Melanis and Flemis owned land in the area the further one gets from the city's core, with the Sangis filling in the unclaimed territories.

The hamlets vary in appearance depending on the nature of the lord in question, each one placing their individual taint as a sign of marking territory. Hence, one Koleris hamlet may appear very different than the next if they are overseen by different lords. The Koleris hamlets tend to look like tight-knit structures, rising up rather than out. This makes them more defensible in the ongoing wars that are waged. The Flemis hamlets are largely underground, even in the outer wall. There are massive tracts of land, dotted with mounds of macabre substances that are in actual fact massive underground Flemis hamlets and hives. The unwary traveler may find herself in the lap of the beast and never know it.

The Melanis hamlets are more like mini-towers that dig deep into the earth, forming dark labyrinthine catacombs. They are well defended by Melanis Constructs and Symbiots (*Horror of the Z'bri*, p. 51).

Finally, the Sangis hamlets are simply created in the remaining plots of the other lords' domains. They indulge in the formation of their estates but, more often than not, see their hard work fall to ruin as Koleris Prides take their land and serfs for their own. Meanwhile, the Sangis start over, as they once again try to stake some claim.

The inner wall covers an area of approximately the size of Bazaar, and is hardly uniform in shape. The city rises at its center and drops steeply towards the water where the river opens up into a cape.

The inner wall is where the real power lies in Capal. It is where the most powerful of lords and nobles of the Z'bri houses make their residences, with the exception of the Koleris. When they are not manning the Fortress, they prefer the open grounds of the outer wall where blood can be shed more freely.

There are many places in Capal that can be explored and the Weaver is urged to expand on the ones detailed here. Future supplements will continue to add to this information, but that should not keep stories from developing outside of official material. Capal undergoes many changes both from within and without, so the Weaver shouldn't hesitate in adapting it to suit her own needs. Below you will find specific information about the locations mentioned in *Word from the North*.

THE FORTRESS

A massive structure that covers a large portion of the south side of the city, the Fortress is where the Prince Thak'ikch'at rules over the city. The lower levels of the Fortress go far deeper than it does skywards, built more like a massive bunker than a standard building. Within, one can find chambers both big and small, all being used by the Koleris as staging grounds for a war that they feel is inevitable — and anticipated. The southernmost edge of the Fortress is a wall some twelve stories in height that drops off into pools of dark murky water below. All along the southern wall of the Fortress, the remains of foes that have fallen to the House Koleris are displayed including, at its centermost point, the heartstones of powerful Z'bri that the Prince has destroyed with his own hands. These artifacts are heavily guarded and are, in part, what gives the Prince his rank as the overlord of Capal.

THE CHT'AUX

A massive citadel located at the highest point in the heart of the city, it is where the ranking Melanis carry out their tasks. Count Nemerath has his personal abode within the charred walls of the Cht'aux, conducting his research and experiments within dedicated halls built solely for him. The Cht'aux is guarded by specialized Symbiot Gargoyles that hover around the rooftops high above. Considered to be impenetrable by most (even the Koleris), the Melanis have an eye on all that transpires in the city around them. From the top, the whole of the land around Capal can be seen. There has been some contention with regards to which House should have the right to the Cht'aux, each one claiming it is in their own benefit to own it, yet no one has been able to snatch it from Melanis control.

THE CATHEDRAL

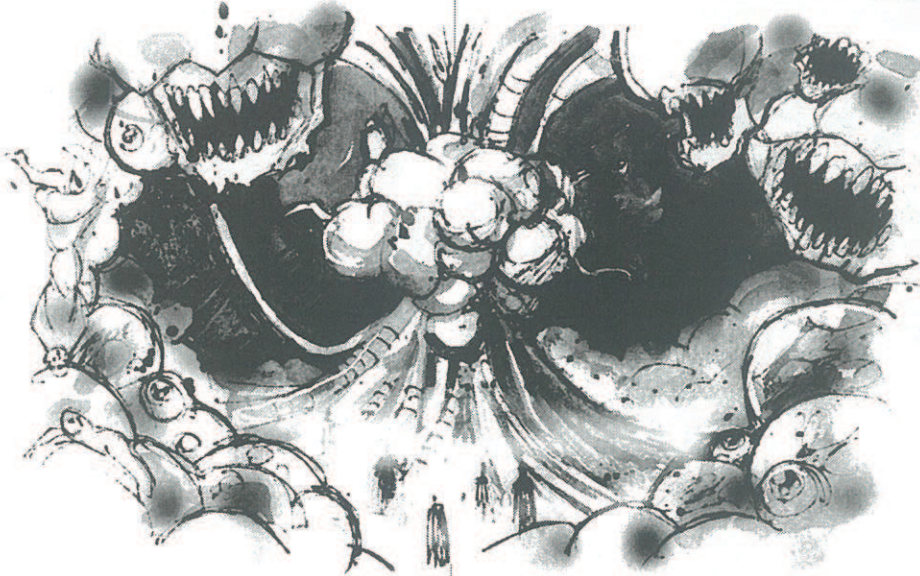
Within Capal, there are small pools of dream that flow and ebb like the tides and, for whatever reason, they often collect in areas that have less Z'bri taint and atmosphere. The Cathedral is one such place. It is a church-like structure made of alabaster white walls. What sets it apart from the rest of Capal is the fact that it is haunted by thousands of spirits from the world before. There are countless lost souls roaming the streets of Capal and many make their way to the Cathedral out of some primal need. They fight over the serfs that enter the hallowed grounds, each one attempting to possess a living body for at least a little while. The Serfs that do go there are slowly changing their beliefs, learning from the spirits that enter them. This ultimately will have profound and unforeseen consequences.

Of course, the spirits have never encountered Dreamers before and are searching for a way out of the limbo they exist in. Weavers can have the PCs use the Cathedral as a safe house of sorts, as even the Z'bri avoid the building. Whether the spirits are malignant towards the PCs or not depends on the story and the Weaver's preferences, although an unpredictable mixture is recommended. Nothing should be obvious about Capal.

HIVE MET'CHKRAY

The catacombs of the city contain massive Flemis hives consisting of hundreds of serfs. The hives themselves are separate from the entities that control them, except in the case of Met'chkray. Eth'ian has chained the Flemis Met'chkray into the architecture of the cavern as well the serfs that were in the hive at the time. It was a massive expenditure of power, but was ultimately successful. This has left an entire cavern as a sentient entity that is forever

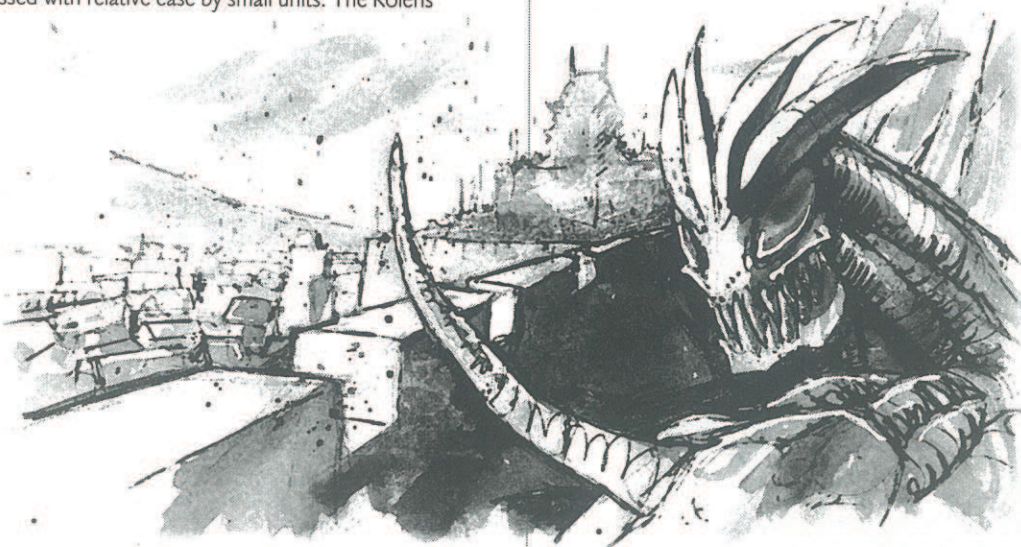
trapped within the confines of the rock. The serfs that survived are simply extensions of the Flemis, no longer separate from their lord. The Hive Met'chkray is a nightmare to enter, a crazed living structure intent on destruction. While a portion of the hive mind managed to escape, it has lost a large part of what it was. The Chaining ritual has broken the hive's "sanity" and can be considered nothing more than a den that invites death upon all those unfortunate enough to enter.



THE WALLS

Surrounding Capal is a continuous wall, broken only by the odd crumbled section and towering gates that control access into and out of the city. The walls are patrolled by serfs and commanded over by lesser Koleris warriors, although it is considered a punishment to be assigned to such a duty. Capal hasn't been attacked or subjected to a massive onslaught of foreign Z'bri for over an era, which means that the defenses can be bypassed with relative ease by small units. The Koleris

warriors who man the walls use most of their time inflicting as much pain as they can on the poor serfs stationed there. The wall itself varies between rising a mere man-length in height to almost ten stories in some places. The Flemis maintain the upkeep of the wall and can, should the need arise, use the senses of assimilated serfs molded within the wall itself to watch over any trespassers.



THE TEMPLE OF FLESH

A disgusting monument of the Sangis, the Temple of the Flesh looks odd in the sea of black, oily buildings that are more common in Capal. The interior of the Sangis halls are continuously changing, being restructured according to the number of serfs that the Sangis have in their control at any given time. When the Sangis are strong, their palace is tall and foreboding, a haunting vision of bodies melded together, but when they are weak, it looks more like a pile of rotting corpses, their diminished collective power unable to maintain the less used portions.

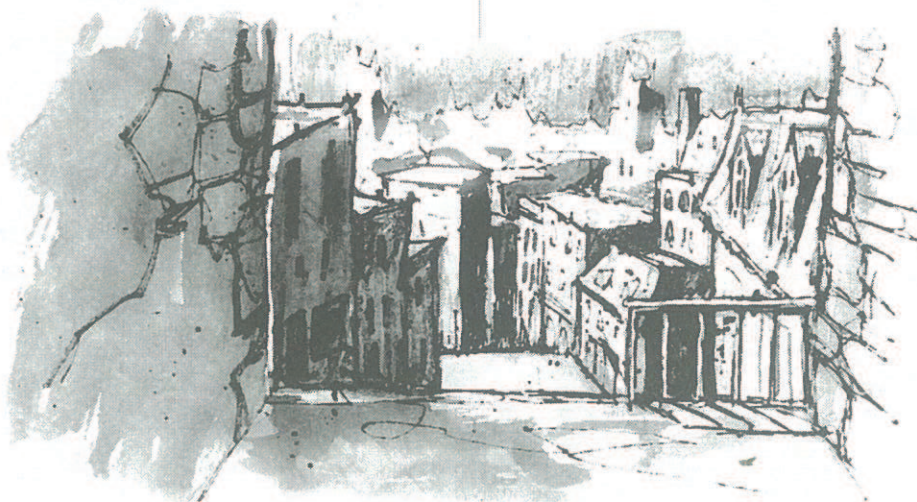
The only chamber that remains intact and fresh, regardless of social difficulties, is the main hall of the Unnamed One. There, the walls move endlessly in throes of passion and lust, the Unnamed One carrying out massive orgies to try to draw as much energy out of his vassals as possible. With the condition the Sangis are currently in, the sexual excesses that take place in the Temple of Flesh provide more in the way of unfulfilled desires than any glamorous orgasmic experiences.



STREETS OF CAPAL

The roads and avenues are tight winding pathways writhing with denizens, both human and otherwise, who seldom take notice of those around them. This despair has led to a monotonous condition within the city, the serfs aimlessly wandering about without any purpose unless active on some task for their Eternal Lords. This makes the streets strangely quiet in Capal, with the odd confrontation should someone venture too near a place that is well protected — the Cht'aux and the Fortress being

prime examples of well-guarded estates. The streets each carry a different essence, and the Weaver should feel free to use any negative emotions and sins that interest her. The street of Gluttony was one example, but there are many other choices to portray. Bitterness, malice, envy, impotence, betrayal, selfishness and intolerance are all possible roads that PCs may need to travel during their adventures in Capal.



THE CATACOMBS

The undercity is not only a network of small tunnels and passages, but also holds massive Z'bri creations that are used for a variety of reasons. The Hive Met'chkray was but one example of an underground hamlet in the catacombs, but the beasts also use them for such things as the imprisonment of slaves, the conducting of rituals involving the Seed, the creation

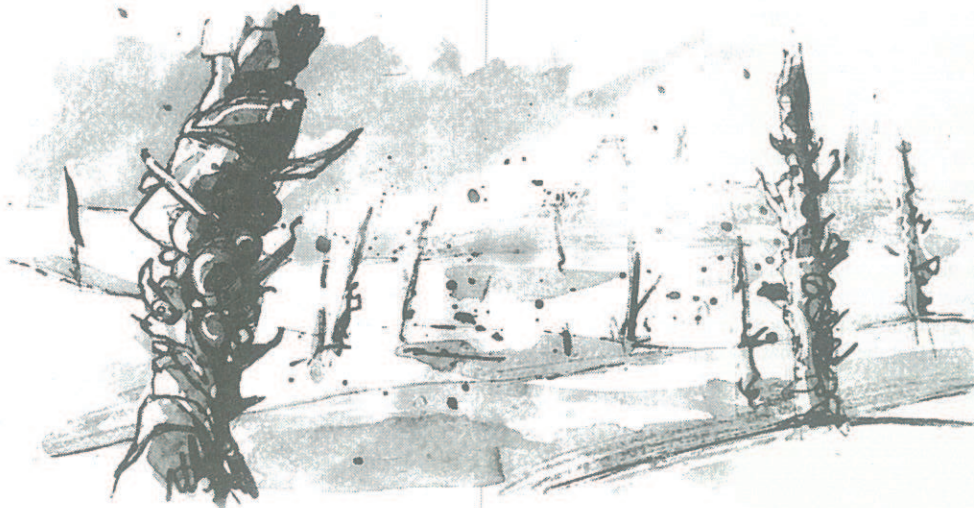
of artifacts and weapons and the plotting of conspiracies. The different Houses all use the Catacombs to some degree, as they provide a safe location to carry out private affairs away from prying eyes. Eth'ian has used the Catacombs for his own experiments, secreting away his new monastery even from the knowledge of Count Nemerath.



THE VALLEY OF SPEARS

Covering the south and north sides of the river, the valley of spears is the first real defense that Capal has. The valley itself is made up of towering black spikes that house creatures called Harvest Mites. These oversized insects attack anything that touches the shell of their homes, at the same time alerting Koleris packs that roam the valley of an intruders presence by the screams that quickly follow. The spears vary in height and width, sprouting like bamboo. The smallest range from a mere

finger-width in height all the way to the largest which grow to just under a single story tall and run half as wide. The valley stretches for about half a klik's distance away from the city on the north bank and even farther on the south bank. While the valley does little in the way of hindering small groups that pass through, it is a brilliant defense against a force any larger than a dozen in number.



FRIENDS AND FOES

Several characters were introduced throughout the **Word from the North**. They are detailed below along with game statistics so that the Weaver can use them for her own cycles, adapting them to fit where necessary. Where it is questionable as to the status of a character (whether they are alive or dead), the write-ups assume that all the NPCs are still active. This way, the Weaver can use the character in her cycles in whatever manner she sees fit.

THE BEASTS

The Z'bri presently rule Capal, there is no question about that, therefore the most powerful of the beasts deserve a little attention in regards to their current agendas and activities. They can also be used as templates to give an idea of the Capalian Z'bri's main attitudes and priorities.

COUNT NEMERATH

The Baron in the H'l Kar made a peace treaty with Count Nemerath many decades ago that allowed both groups time to recuperate after the Liberation and the death of Tibor. At the time, Count Nemerath knew that the Z'bri needed to reassess their place in the realm of flesh. The Capal Z'bri developed a very different outlook on where humanity fit into the big picture, and decided to hold true to the tradition of the camps. The Count knew that it was merely a temporary solution, but that the rest would work itself out in due time. Count Nemerath still communicates with Deacon Vytor in the H'l Kar and is abreast of the troubles that plague the Z'bri there. While he does not have the same goals as Prince Thak'ikch'at, the Koleris do serve the purpose of keeping any attention away from the Melanis House, and also protect Capal from any would-be dissidents from the H'l Kar.

PRINCE THAK'IKCH'AT

More menacing than any other Koleris known to exist, the Prince of Capal stands as tall and imposing as a Joanite Tower. He is covered in jagged protrusions that jut out of his body, and can kill the weak with a thought alone. He has complete control over anyone in his presence and it is rumored he has not spoken since the Liberation as his words are 'lined with swords.' He communicates through a Sangis observer who relays the wishes of the Prince to whomever is being held in audience. Any given observer rarely survives more than a few years in this service, because spending extended periods of time in Thak'ikch'at's presence slowly tears them apart both physically and mentally. While Capal is held fast in the Prince's grip, Thak'ikch'at knows that the troubles that the Baron has permitted in Vimary will soon rise up to haunt him as well.

THE UNNAMED ONE

Unable to pull himself out of the lowly standing that his House has been given, the Unnamed One knows that Capal will be the death of him if assertive action is not taken soon. The Sangis Prince wishes to get some word to the Baron, but the Melanis spies and the Flemis investigators prevent him from making any headway in this direction. The Koleris relentlessly hinder his vassals by destroying his estates at a frightening frequency, further complicating any attempts at gaining status, branding the Unnamed One as the black sheep of Capal. While someone of his caliber would prosper in the H'l Kar, the vicious environment of Capal, coupled with all the enmity of the other Houses working against him, keeps him from succeeding in any noticeable way.

ETH'IAN

Once the Baron's trusted advisor, Eth'ian took a gamble and ended up being exiled from the H'l Kar (see **Trial by Fire**). Using his contacts with Deacon Vytor, he arranged to enter Capal under Count Nemerath's wing. Eth'ian is using the Count's resources to further his own goals and secretly wishes to recreate the Covenant in a new, more efficient model. With the knowledge he gained from his experiments on the Fold, Eth'ian suspects that the secret power that supports Nemerath's control in Capal can be reaped for his own endeavors. Eth'ian is quite used to playing deadly games of betrayal but is taking steps to make certain that he has enough allies amongst the Koleris should the Count become displeased with his "ambition."

HIVE MET'CHKRAY

Once a Flemis Investigator, the hive Met'chkra ended up on the wrong side of a conspiracy that sealed his doom. Prior to that, however, Met'chkra held a massive hamlet in the catacombs within the inner walls of Capal. He had the favor of many ruling Z'bri and did work that benefited the goals of Capal in general. Met'chkra survived for countless generations in Capal, but never in the same capacity or strength that he did most recently. While the reasons behind his chaining *will* be investigated, there is a small, desperate part of him that escaped into the Fallen Jacker, Damien. The mixing of the chaining ritual coupled with the Flemis mindset has made Met'chkra more a part of Damien than the other way around. He is truly interested in remaining with the human, even assisting him in forming a new cell to quest back to Capal with. He is somewhat excited to meet with the renowned Guides and hopes the knowledge gained will provide him with the strength to warn Count Nemerath of what he has learned about the Serf dreamers, Eth'ian and the Fallen.

KAIL'AK

The most recent observer for Thak'ikch'at, he is delighted to be given such a ranking position. Kail'ak has no intention of perishing as the Prince's observer however, and is looking for any means available to contact someone that has connections with the H'I Kar. All formal audiences go through the Prince, so Kail'ak believes that his task will be easier because of his exposure to important dignitaries and lords. Little does Kail'ak know that the Unnamed One keeps tabs on everything that goes on in the Koleris war-halls by seeing through his eyes. The Unnamed One knows that Kail'ak wants to defect but will let the pawn open up avenues without making himself vulnerable. Kail'ak, on the other hand, has nothing to lose with the venture and is willing to take whatever risks are necessary to escape to the H'I Kar.



SERFS

The humans that remain in bondage to the beasts are a sorry sight, unable to express themselves in any way except for the pleasure of their masters. They have largely fallen into a state of complete hopelessness, unable to realize that there is something better for them to strive towards. While the serfs understand that serving the Z'bri is the only life that they will ever really know, there are a few who have broken through the veil and touched a part of themselves that is deeply hidden away — their spirituality. Many serfs are looking at the ones who are awakening to the River of Dream with a sense of awe, worshipping the confused dreamers in the same way they would the Z'bri. Where the power is coming from, none can truly say, but once word of this new phenomenon reaches the Fallen, Capal will no longer remain on the fringes of the imagination.



ISA

She had everything a serf could ever want: the favor of her lords, the gift of remembrance and the status of a Chosen, but despite all these things something was missing. When she finally discovered what this was, she feared it and ran from the possibility of finally being free from her slavery. She was re-awakened when Eth'ian came into the picture, his search for the source of her dreaming ability an important clue to his own quest to cross the Fold. Since Isa has been practicing her mastery over the dream, especially with the help of Chantalle, she is starting to accept her destiny — and the Goddess — into her heart. Of course, the questions she raises are far more numerous than what she can truthfully answer. Isa's whereabouts are left open for the Weaver to decide, so whether she shows up in Hom, in the custody of the Tribes or remains in the Outlands is left to be explored.

THE FALLEN

Throughout narratives of previous supplements there have been visions and hints of Capal's existence. This has created a silent hush of whispers amongst the Fallen about the meaning behind these clues. There are many more mysteries to be discovered, however, and once the legends of Capal trickle into Hom the results will be explosive. Capal shows that there will come a time for the Children of Prophecy to take on the full weight of responsibility that comes with the burden of destiny.

L'ESPRIT DES ETOILES

They survived the reign of Lilith as well as the Inquisition of the Tribes, never backing down from a challenge when it arose. This cell symbolizes the unity that is required for the Fallen to find its path, and can be seeded into a cycle as friends of the PCs or as a part of the PC cell itself if the Weaver wishes. They are not the only ones to have traveled to Capal and follow their visions; thus they can be used as a model with which to design other cells with similar or parallel goals.



KARENNA

Doomsayers look up to Karenna, as she has always been accurate in translating the visions she receives. She is loyal to her cell and fights for a better tomorrow so that the Children of the Fall will have some place to call home. She is a beautiful woman with a proud demeanor, but is not unapproachable. She is considered the leader of the cell, although she does not ever flout this herself. Karenna has a strong spiritual attachment to Isa as well as to the power that emanates from the Cht'aux. She is in love with Damien Farshadow and supports him through thick and thin. Although they are not officially bound by marriage, they are committed to each other for life.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Enchanting, Spiritual, Insightful

EMINENCES:

Truth, Mystery Aspect: Truthsaying

ATTRIBUTES:

AGI	0	APP	1	BLD	-1	CRE	2	FIT	0
INF	1	KNO	2	PER	0	PSY	4	WIL	0
STR	0	HEA	1	STA	25	UD	2	AD	3

SKILLS:

Boating (Canoe)	1	0	Combat Sense	1	0	Dodge	1	0
Dreaming	2	+4	Healing	1	+2	Investigation	1	0
Lore (Enigmas)	1	+2	Lore (Capal)	1	+1	Melee	1	0
Mythology*	2	+2	Ritual	3	+2	Survival (Winter)	1	+2
Synthesis	3		* (Prophecy)					

DAMIEN FARSHADOW

Incredibly loyal to his cell L'Etoiles des Esprits, Damien has made quite a name for himself amongst the Jackers of Hom. He is known for standing up for what he believes in, regardless of consequence, although he never resorts to conflict unless it is his one and only option. He sees the strength of the Eighth Tribe growing, especially after the previous year's Inquisition, and works hard towards finding the path of destiny.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Disciplined, Resolute, Thoughtful

EMINENCES:

Fate, Bravery

ATTRIBUTES:

AGI	2	APP	0	BLD	0	CRE	0	FIT	3
INF	0	KNO	0	PER	1	PSY	0	WIL	2
STR	1	HEA	1	STA	30	UD	4	AD	5

SKILLS:

Archery	1	+2	Athletics (Hiking)	1	+3	Combat Sense*	2	+1
Craft (Skinning)	1	0	Dodge**	2	+2	Hand-to-Hand	1	+2
Healing	1	0	Lore (Capal*)	1	0(+2*)	Melee***	2	+2
Notice (Ambushes)	2	+1	Sneak	1	+2	Survival (Winter)	1	0
Synthesis 1			* (Ambush)			** (Long Weapons)		
*** (Bastard Sword)								

*Memories from the Hive Met'chkay





FREDRIQUE

A Jacker who is well aware of his spiritual shortcomings, Fredrique focuses all of his training and experience into his martial skills. He understands that his weaknesses will one day prove to be a major hurdle to overcome, therefore he spends much of his time listening intently to the conversations and teachings of Karennia. Despite this, his frustration towards grasping the principles that involve the River of Dream oftentimes proves too much, and he once again digresses to concentrating on what he knows best. However his friends do not hold this against him as Fredrique has saved their lives more than once in conflicts that otherwise would have been no-win situations.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Quiet, Hot Tempered, Scarred

EMINENCES:

Fury, Vengeance

ATTRIBUTES:

AGI	3	APP	-1	BLD	1	CRE	0	FIT	3
INF	0	KNO	-2	PER	1	PSY	-1	WIL	0
STR	2	GEA	1	STA	35	UD	8	AD	8

SKILLS:

Boating*	2	+0	Combat Sense**	3	+1	Dodge***	2	+3
Hand-to-Hand	2	+3	Melee (Sword)	2	+3	Notice	1	+1
Riding (Horse)	1	-1	Survival****	1	0	Swimming	1	+3
Tactics**	2	+0	Throwing*****	1	+3	*(Long Boat)		
** (Skirmish)			*** (Hand-to-Hand Attacks)			**** (Trapping Maneuvers)		
***** (Mountains)			***** (Hammers)					

TATIANA

Once a Dahlian who traveled far into the Outlands with her caravan, Tatiana soon encountered many outlying serfs and squats that were living meaningless, soulless lives. This interested her to no end, finally becoming a personal quest for her to unravel the differences between the dreamers of Vimary and the lost souls she came to pity. Her investigations caused something of a stir amongst the Tribes, that led to her inevitable banishment. Tatiana never regretted her banishment and, rather, saw the freedom she was granted as a gift from the Goddess to liberate all those whom the Fatimas forgot.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Questing, Empathetic, Defensive

EMINENCES:

Motion, Recognition

ATTRIBUTES:

AGI	2	APP	1	BLD	0	CRE	1	FIT	0
INF	0	KNO	1	PER	3	PSY	0	WIL	1
STR	0	HEA	0	STA	25	UD	3	AD	4

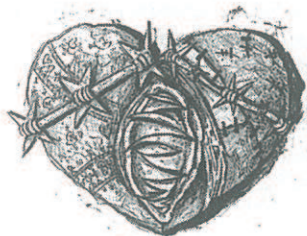
SKILLS:

Archery (Bows)	3	+2	Boating (Rivers)	1	+3	Combat Sense	2	+3
Camouflage*	2	+1	Craft (Bows)	2	+1	Dodge	1	+2
Melee (Daggers)	1	+2	Notice	1	+3	Survival	1	0
Tactics (Archery)	1	+1	Synthesis	2*	(Urban)			



THE TRIBES

The Tribes have as much to do with the future of humanity as the Fallen do, and are often far more involved than they are credited for. Tribal Circles are recently exploring further to the north than they ever have before, and with this, knowledge of Capal will inevitably return to the halls of Grand Council.



CHANTALLE, MAGDALITE DIPLOMAT

Doomed to become a Diplomat to the H'I Kar, Chantalle was taken from the life she knew as an Ecstatic and thrown into a whirlwind of chaos. After her tortuous ordeal in Capal she has found the strength to return to her past lover, Veronique, and warns her of the evil that resides to the north past the forbidden lands. She hopes that the message she brings will spread, in turn, breaking the ignorance that plagues the Tribals and the Fallen of Vimary. Her strength of will and selfless sacrifice (after others hear of her tragic tale) becomes renowned. The word from the north spreads quickly, infecting all levels of Fallen and Tribal society.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Determined, Tragic, Morose

EMINENCES:

Conflict, Sensuality Aspect: Treason

ATTRIBUTES:

AGI	0	APP	2 (-1*)	BLD	0	CRE	0	FIT	0
INF	2 (0*)	KNO	1	PER	0	PSY	3 (1*)	WIL	2
STR	0	HEA	2 (1*)	STA	35 (30*)	UD	3	AD	3

SKILLS:

Cooking	1	0	Dance	1	0	Dreaming	2 +3(-1*)
Etiquette	2+2(0*)	Grooming	1+2(-1*)	Herbalism	2	+1	
Lore (Herbs)	1	+1	Lore (Capal)	2	+1	Navigation *	1 +1
Ritual	1	+1	Seduction	1+2(-1*)	Synthesis	2	

* (to Capal)

*Attributes after her capture.



TRAVIS DAN'ON

Being a Terasheban comes with a lot of pressure. Travis suffered from this all of his life, always being told he was never good enough to accomplish any good for his family and clan. This made the young Lorekeeper very jaded towards others, half expecting them to put him down in some way no matter what he does. With the formation of the Harvest Circle he found a new sense of direction, although the true nature of the mission was beyond his understanding at first. Travis has matured beyond his years, having been through an ordeal that very few others have been forced to endure. He remains in the Outlands at the end of the story, acting as a guide and wise man for those seeking knowledge about the Northern Wind and, specifically, Capal.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Arrogant, Learning, Young

EMINENCES:

Truth, Wisdom

ATTRIBUTES:

AGI	0	APP	0	BLD	0	CRE	0	FIT	0
INF	1	KNO	1	PER	0	PSY	0	WIL	3
STR	0	HEA	1	STA	30	UD	3	AD	4

SKILLS:

Combat Sense	1	0	Craft	2	0	Dodge	1	0
Healing	1	+1	Human Percep.	1	0	Investigation	1	0
Law (Tribal)	2	+1	Leadership	1	+1	Lore (Capal)	2	+1
Melee (Staff)	1	0	Mythology**	2	+1	Navigation***	2	+1
Notice	2	0	Sneak****	1	0	Survival (Winter)	2	0
Teaching	1	0	Synthesis	1	*	(Snow Shelters)		
** (Northern Wind)			*** (Northern Wind)			**** (Wilderness)		

TERRANCE

Even amongst Magdalites, Terrance is considered to be excessively orgiastic in his dealings. He has absolutely no moral fiber anywhere in his body and was sent to the Outlands by a Dan'on Judge, his unacceptable behavior being noticed where it was not welcome. He did, however, manage to pick up on the dreamers' call while journeying through the Eastern Wind and saw his chance to once again gain favor amongst his Tribe. He solicited the Sirens of Magdalen to speak to the Masters on his behalf to form a Harvest Circle. In order to keep any blame of such an excursion away from the Magdalites, the Masters only agreed to allow the Circle to form should a Sheban be found to lead it. Travis Dan'on fell right into Terrance's trap since the lover wanted nothing more than to carry out his personal revenge on the Dan'on clan.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Ruthless, Selfish, Unrestrained

EMINENCES:

Conflict, Sensuality

ATTRIBUTES:

APP	3	AGI	0	BLD	-1	CRE	1	FIT	0
INF	-1	KNO	-1	PER	1	PSY	0	WIL	2
STR	0	HEA	1	STA	25	UD	2	AD	2

SKILLS:

Dreaming 1/0, Etiquette 1/-1, Gambling 2/+1, Grooming 1/+3, Haggling 1/-1, Herbalism (Stimulants) 1/-1, Human Perception 3/0, Interrogation 2/+1, Lore (Capal) 1/-1, Seduction 3/+3, Theatrics (Sexual) 2/-1



2. Weaver Resources

GERARD

A close friend of Terrance, the young Ecstatic found that his Diplomat companion could provide a means of returning to Vimary for good. He serves Terrance loyally, having given in to the Diplomat's wiles. Gerard was given the Outlands duty by chance, his mother disappointed because of his unattractive features. This has been the story of his life, as Gerard has never been given the room to grow by himself, always succumbing to what others deem is in his best interest.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Easily Manipulated, Insecure, Wanting to please

EMINENCES:

Conflict, Sensuality

ATTRIBUTES:

AGI	0	APP	-1	BLD	2	CRE	1	FIT	0
INF	-2	KNO	0	PER	1	PSY	-2	WIL	0
STR	1	HEA	-1	STA	30	UD	6	AD	6

SKILLS:

Agriculture	2	0	Cooking	2	+1	Craft (Weaving)	1	+1
Healing	1	0	Herbalism**	3	0	Lore (Herbs)	2	0
Navigation***	1	0	Riding	1	-2	Sleight of Hand	1	0
Sneak	2	0	Synthesis	1		* (Herbs)		
** (Potions)			*** (Eastern Wind)					



YUMA

Wise beyond her years, Yuma has a powerful connection with the spirits. She was chosen to accompany the Circle to discover the status of the Spirits in Capal, as well as to keep an eye on things in general. Baba Yaga Herself ordered Yuma to the quest, confident in knowing that the gifted mystic was perfect for the job. Yuma knows that she is a prodigy but downplays her importance. She only seeks to free the time required to learn of the River of Dream's deepest secrets.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Reserved, Wise, Mystical

EMINENCES:

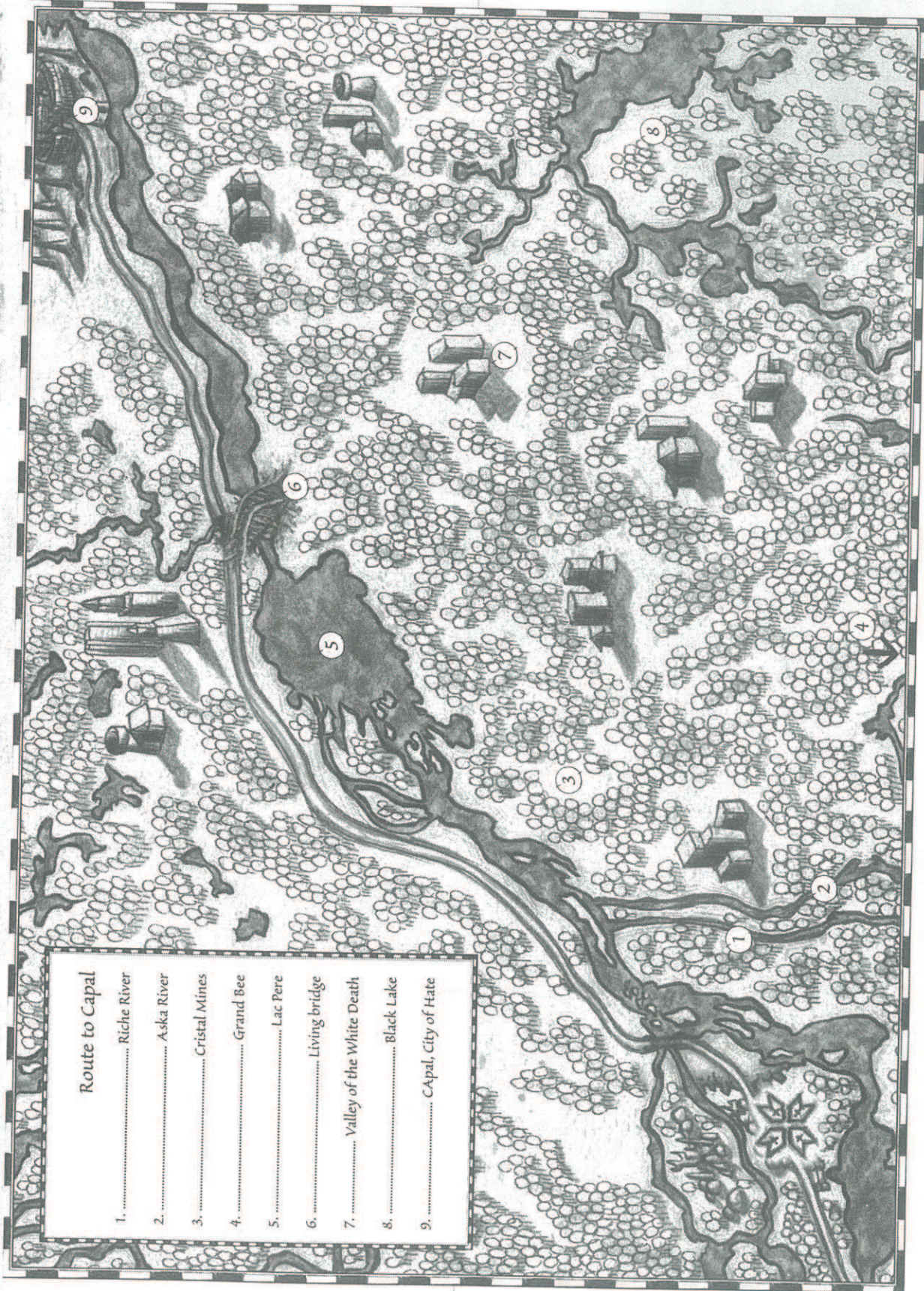
Death, Fate. Aspects: Curse of Dream, Dream Travel

ATTRIBUTES:

AGI	0	APP	-2	BLD	-1	CRE	2	FIT	2
INF	0	KNO	3	PER	0	PSY	3	WIL	0
STR	0	HEA	2	STA	30	UD	2	AD	2

SKILLS:

Animal Handling*	1	+2	Combat Sense**1	0	Dance***	2	0	
Dreaming	3	+3	Herbalism	1	+3	Human Perception1	+3	
Law (Yagan)	1	+3	Lore (Spirits)	2	+3	Music (Flute)	1	+2
Mythology	2	+2	Ritual	2	+3	Synthesis	3	
* (Sacrifice Rituals)			** (Defensive)			*** (With Spirits)		
**** (Spirits)								





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TRIBE 8

NEW YEAR'S TRIBE

Tribe 8 enters its second year with a bang in Children of Lilith, but there's lots more stuff out now or on the horizon. Tribe 8 continues to be one of the most exciting game lines in the industry. Don't miss out!

TRIBE 8 PRODUCTS

Weaver's Screen and Assistant

DP9-802; 48 pages + 3-panel screen; \$18.95; AVAILABLE NOW

The Weaver's Assistant includes detailed advice on creating and running a cycle, a fully detailed quest to start things off, outlines of several subsequent quests (forming a four part mini-cycle), statistics for useful Non-Player Characters and several game aids. The Weaver's Assistant also comes packaged with the Tribe 8 Weaver's Screen, a full-color three-fold screen featuring gorgeous artwork on one side and all the useful game tables on the other.

Vimary Sourcebook

DP9-803; 144 pages; \$22.95; AVAILABLE NOW

The Vimary Sourcebook is the core supplement for the entire Tribe 8 game line. It details the full scope of the game's base setting, and provides countless ideas and resources for quests and cycles. It provides full coverage of history, prominent characters and areas, including tribal lands, Hom, the mysterious Rust Wastes and the dreaded H'l Kar, home of the Z'bri (with over a dozen evocative maps).

Tribe 8 Companion

DP9-805; 112 pages; \$19.95; AVAILABLE NOW

• The Tribe 8 Companion (DP9-805): The perfect complement to the T8 Rulebook. The Companion includes source material on Keepers, Joshua, Mary and Tribal Quest Circles, along with advanced rules, magical artifacts and a complete scenario.

Tribe 8 Jewelry

Georgia Panaritis, the premier creator of RPG-related fine jewelry, has produced a first series of pendants and brooches related to Tribe 8 (Tera Sheba, Joan, the Fallen, the Seven Tribes). Check out her web site at <http://www.cam.org/~java/TheCrypt/>, or the DP9 on-line catalog at <http://www.dp9.com/>.



UPCOMING PRODUCTS

• THE WARRIOR UNBOUND (DP9-813): Step into a world in motion, with the first book of "Conquest," the second cycle of the Tribe 8 storyline. In the wake of the trial of the Fallen, Joan casts off the chains of obedience tying Her to Her Sisters, and reaches out to the Fallen outcasts. At the same time, a hidden group begins an experiment that may tear apart the very fabric of reality itself.

• WORD OF THE FATES (DP9-814): Learn the secrets and the plans of Magdalen the Lover, Eva the Mother and Baba Yaga the Crone in the second Tribe 8 Wordbook. This product will include a history of the Fatimas and their people, background on the goals of the Tribes and the most important Tribe members, and NPC templates to ease character construction.

• BROKEN PACT (DP9-813): The second book of the "Conquest" cycle, Broken Pact takes the battle to the killing fields of the Z'bri themselves. A nation that will be born in fire must first be bathed in blood. Can the fractured people of Vimary unite long enough to beat back the monsters on their doorstep?

On-Line Support

Still can't get enough T8? Check out the Dream Pod 9 Funhouse at <http://www.dp9.com/funhouse/> for scenarios, legends and other articles relating to T8.

For more information on Tribe 8, visit Dream Pod 9's web site at www.dp9.com.

